

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Biggs lives in St Kilda, Melbourne. She worked as a journalist for six years on the *Sunday Herald Sun* after working as a reporter on Melbourne suburbans and on local newspapers in and around Daylesford in country Victoria. She has also written for the *Australian Financial Review* and worked as a television researcher. She is now a property developer and writer.

In Moral Danger is her first book.



Photograph by Lissa Strauss

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

DOROTHY PARKER



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The form I used to tell this story has become known as the autobiographical novel. This is to say, that although all the incidents told here happened, literary devices have been employed to fill in memory gaps so that it reads like a novel. (I'm aware that such an extraordinary story may seem unlikely to some. However evidence of much of it can be found in media and public archives.)

This is a faithful rendering of the facts as I remember them. Some names and personal details have been changed to protect the identities of certain people who did not wish to be identified. Unexpectedly, I had remarkable clarity about many conversations, but where memory failed, the tone and general content were recreated for dramatic flow. Similarly, for minor details such as place descriptions, dreams and dates, like most memories, mine is not perfect and literary devices helped bring the story to life.

In writing this, I quickly realised that if the reader were to gain a better understanding of the fragile emotional mechanics of one girl's underage sex experience and its consequences, I had to be unflinching in the telling. I wish no-one in the story ill will. If, despite name changes, some people can still be identified and this causes them embarrassment or discomfort, I apologize. If it's any consolation, the priority of the story meant I had to be almost as brutal with everybody else's privacy as I was with my own. I beg tolerance and understanding in the name of a wider concern.

Barbara Biggs 2003

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Cover photograph: Me, Bloss, Pommy, baby Peter, Mick and Jenny

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without my mother's love, which enabled her to put my interests above her own, I would not have been able to tell this story uncensored. If Little Dan Biggs, my baby son, hadn't come into my life, I would have remained lost, like so many others, and the story could not have been written at all. If Big Dan Biggs, my man son, hadn't cared about me even more after reading it I might not have published it. If all my family weren't prepared to live with any possible consequences of the book, I'd have been in a pickle. Thanks.

I'd also like to thank Jennifer Dabbs for her professional and personal support; Claire Heaney for her time and creative ideas; Robyn Grimshaw for being my rock; Sal Gibson for setting me on the writing path and weathering my pupa stage; Fiona Smith for being my Australian lifeline during the first draft; Alfie Kleitsch for his advice, clarity and chapter headings; Hazel Flynn for her belief in the early manuscript; Su Pollard, Pam Kershaw and Allison Hicks for marketing advice and friendship; Andrew Rule and John Silvester for going where most publishers feared to tread; all those, too numerous to name, who gave feedback on the manuscript; editor Bryony Cosgrove for taking on a novice author and Holmesglen TAFE's novel writing class of '99 for teaching me that my first draft had to be thrown away.

This story would never have been written without the benefit and support of Gough Whitlam and the Labor Party's social policies of the early 1970s. The single parent pension gave me breathing space to bring up my son and be stabilized by that bond and free university gave me the means to see my way out of the quagmire and learn the skills to write it. I'd also like to thank the following people for their long-lived love, encouragement and support: Joanne Singer (deceased), Carol Prichard, Bronwyn Jones, Annie Stephenson, Lissa Strauss, Paula Johnson and Cathy Riggs.

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MY FAMILY TREE



*This book is dedicated to my family
And to those who never learned to smile.*

PROLOGUE

The people I've envied most are the ones who smile easily. I'd look at them and think they were born that way. Easy smilers. I've tried to be a good smiler. It just hasn't worked. Nothing worse than a bad smiler working on a trying smile.

But in the last few years I've become a natural smiler. I don't know exactly where or how it happened. I do remember a while back realizing that wishing wouldn't make it happen. So, I thought about hypnotherapy, promised myself I'd do affirmations, but tried twice and felt silly. I didn't think about it again. Then, one day, I realised it had happened.

Like everyone else, I've always wanted to be likeable. I never have been. I've been a prickly pear. An acquired taste. Lately, without me even trying, strangers just seem to like me. It really blows me away. Me? Even though I know it's the wholeness in me, a kind of purity you just wouldn't expect to be there after the life I've had. Remembering it all here has been a coming of age for me. An arrival in itself. Some days I have to pinch myself to believe that I dug myself out from under the rubble and found the easy-going, easy-smiling person I was meant to be (had I not had cause to write this story).

Even though I didn't set out to change anything, I think that since I was little I've wanted to stand for something. One summer lunchtime in prep, I took my shoes and socks off in the playground even though I knew I'd get the strap from the nuns, which I did. But I liked being different for daring to do something you should be allowed to do on a hot day.

Well, telling my story just how it was is like going against the rules again. You're not supposed to say the truth when it's ugly and uncomfortable for everyone. Yes, some loves *are* hideous. But if we can't tell how our souls have been muddied, how can we ever clean them?

BULLETS OFF SUPERMAN



January 1999

'Lucky you weren't permanently damaged, Ma.'

'Rubbish! It's a medical fact that fat people hardly ever break bones.'

We'd been talking about her Horse Accident when one of her phones rang. With phones she's like a kid with too many toys. They ring all day and night. How could one person need five mobiles? As well as a landline. I know why now, of course.

'They're very, very big,' she's saying into a mobile. 'They haven't got any wrinkles but they hang down a lot and they're very brown. In fact I'm brown all over. If you saw them they could be from a 30-year-old ... they're big and pink ... It's floppy. It sticks out but not so's you'd think oh, she's got a fat stomach, but it is floppy.' This doesn't sound like the standard fantasy phone call. She's describing herself, throwing in a few porky pies. She used to be thirty stone, now twenty. I don't know whether to go or stay. There are some things about your own mother you don't want to know.

'A little bit ... black and curly ... big and fat.'

I go into another room to wait. I'm visiting, for the first time, the new house Ma's partner Lionel bought for her near Byron Bay.

In the room across the hallway there's a model village with old English houses by the side of a train track winding around through tunnels and under bridges. There are traffic signals and bells, people tossing hay with pitchforks, coal miners waving at the train as it passes and donkeys carting bundles of wood. I've asked her before: Do you actually play with it? Course I do, she'd said. Why else would I have it?

The walls of the same room are covered with small plates. Painted with English scenery and numbered, all ordered, but not all paid for. 'They'll be worth a fortune when I'm dead,' Ma bragged. In a display cabinet is a collection of Swarovsky crystal animals, wheelbarrows and windmills.

I hear another of Ma's mobiles ring. She ends the first call and starts another. This time it's a standard one — complete with huffing and puffing. I stay where I am.

Dotted elsewhere are dolls: Lady Di, Jackie Kennedy, brides with Italian-terraced trounces and Bambi eyes. For the first time I see photos of us, the children. In her old age, Ma's finally nesting. Or maybe returning to happier times.

As a young girl, an only child, she'd been spoilt. Adored by her single parent mother, her uncle and mother's parents. 'They thought the sun shone out of me arse.'

Even though she was a fat child, no-one teased her until she was ten and changed schools to where the kids didn't

know her. Then, at puberty, her Uncle Bill, the one she loved most, stopped cuddling her. In fact, maybe afraid of his own feelings, he began ignoring her. She was devastated and ran away from home when she was fourteen. And stole three hundred pounds her mother was minding for her grocer boyfriend. With some of the money, Ma bought a plane ticket to Perth in the days when flight was an adventure.

It was there, on a sheep station, she'd fallen from a horse and been dragged, one foot still in the stirrup, until her ear was hanging off. Newspapers around the country ran headlines like 'MYSTERY TEENAGER IN COMA'. No-one knew her real name. That's how Gran was able to find her.

But now her story's interrupted again. I'm annoyed.

I know the caller must have finished because I hear Ma from the other room.

'I bet that feels better. Now, have you heard of Amway?' She became a rep a year ago and isn't about to pass up a sales opportunity. But he must have declined her offer of a spiel because Ma hangs up. I return to the TV room.

'Ma, I thought you said you'd switch your phones off.'

'I forgot. And anyway, I'd arranged to talk to the first bloke last week.'

'Can they go off now? All of them?'

She pulls phones out of bags, from the bowels of her chair and from the giant folds of her bosom. Off they go, one by one.

'Who was he anyway?'

'Oh, this guy who's writing a book and one of his characters is a large Madam. He wanted to know what I looked like. For his book.'

'How did he find you?'

'He saw one of me ads in the paper.'

Ma advertises her sexual services, describing herself as a 'lovely, large, mature lady.'

'Do you think he really is writing a book?'

'Hmm. I wondered that meself.'

Ma's hundred faces make her a walking paradox. How could such a schemer be so gullible?

I wonder what Lionel thinks about Ma's work. They rekindled their flame last year after a thirty-year hiatus. He's the father of my youngest brother Peter, his only child. He and Ma had an affair for five years back then but he was married. His wife died three years ago. Now, eighteen years older than Ma, he looks like the cartoon character Mister Magoo. A vagueness whispers about him like fairy floss.

When they first met in 1959, Ma was pregnant with my younger sister Sandra — the one that Gran, Ma's mother, later dubbed Bloss, short for Blossom. Ma was doing her yearly stint street walking on Queens Road in St Kilda just before Christmas. There were already my younger brother Mick and two older sisters Jenny and Linda, who Gran nicknamed Pommy because, inexplicably, she spoke with an English accent from the time she could first talk. That already made a lot of presents to buy on Ma's telephonist wage. There were no pensions for single mums back then. Before Lionel came along there'd already been four different fathers and three had disappeared completely, including mine.

Mine had been Ma's very first client. Or so she said. After the deed they talked for hours and met again. 'Muggins me never charged him after the first time.' Ma had laughed at her folly when she told me this. They went out a few times over a week or so. He was married with three children and owned or worked at a garage on Dandenong Road in Springvale. He was short, with olive skin, dark eyes and an Australian accent but maybe European heritage. One hand was withered and permanently bent at the wrist. A birth defect, Ma thought. Five years later, she met him on the street again and invited him home. 'I've got something to show you,' she'd said. There was a photo of her six kids on the mantelpiece. She asked him to guess which one was his. He picked me straight away. Then she took him into my room and showed me to him while I was sleeping. I imagine him standing there watching me. That's all I know about my father.

Lionel was the last of the fathers. Number five. I asked her once why she kept having children when she could have used condoms. 'I just liked babies, that's all,' she had said. I guess she never thought about whether or not she liked unruly, difficult teenagers.

Lionel had bought Ma a house when she got pregnant with his child. She was his mistress for five years until Ma gave him an ultimatum: Leave your wife or I leave you. He refused and she packed up her clan and abandoned the house.

They met again a year ago. Now he's the one who adores her.

'It must drive you crazy, Ma talking on the phone all day,' I say to wispy Lionel.

'You're not bloody wrong. It's a wonder her ruddy ear doesn't fall off.'

'Doesn't all that sex talk drive you nuts?'

'Not really. You get used to it. Like anything.'

'What about the physicals? Doesn't that bother you?' When Ma has a client Lionel politely leaves the house and returns an hour later. She calls these appointments 'the physicals'. Only Ma. I supposed that means the fantasy calls are aurals.

'Nah,' says Lionel. 'She was doing it when we met, so there's nothing really different. You know, it's her life. She can do with it what she likes.'

You could understand her prostitution then, when she was broke. She mostly did it to buy Christmas presents. 'They don't grow on trees you know.' But now her family's grown. And Lionel, besides, has money.

I'd been curious about her clients (some were young and cute) and why she still did it when she'd told me she didn't even like sex.

'Doesn't it bother them that you're no spring chicken?' I'd asked.

'Noooo! They really love older ladies.'

'Why? Do you think they've been sexually abused by their grandmothers or something?'

'Well, some have, I have to admit. But others just like old, fat ladies. They really do. It's just what turns them on. They tell me how gorgeous I am. It feels great.'

'But Ma, you hate sex. You've told me a million times.' I've heard before how she's never had an orgasm with a man. She says she lies there and makes the right groaning noises until they come.

I've often wondered if her emotional and sexual remove is due to being 'interfered with' by the grocer when she was eight. She has no memory of exactly what happened, only that he'd 'touched her up' a few times. It also couldn't have helped that, like me, her first experience of sexual penetration had been a rape when she was fourteen. Hers was after a dance at the Trocadero Club, opposite the Alexandra Gardens in Melbourne. He was a soldier. Ma loved men in uniform. On the tram on the way home, she 'bled like a stuck pig,' she had told me.

'Well, yes, I do hate it. But when a guy pays to have sex with ya, you know they really think you're gorgeous. No woman can resist being told she's beautiful, can she?'

She'd told me how one client paid \$200 to look at her naked for an hour without touching her or himself. He kept telling her over and over how beautiful she was.

When Ma finished her call, and I checked all her phones were off, she told me about how she'd met her one and only husband, Arthur Biggs, the man we all thought was our father. I'm curious about our history. Her history. I'd never thought to ask before now.

She was working on the telephone exchange at the Post Master General's Department. Arthur was relieving on the exchange at an air force base at Wagga Wagga, in country New South Wales.

'We used to talk for hours while we were both on night shift. I had a pretty sexy voice in those days. Arthur didn't sound too bad, either.'

'What did he do in the air force?'

'What?'

After half an hour of my questions, Ma's bored. Distracted. She fishes for something down the side of her rocker. The cushion farts as she searches.

'Arthur. What did he do?'

'He was an instrument maker.' Ma's hand surfaces with a Gameboy. She loves Tetris, the game with endless supplies of five cubes in lines of U, T or L-shapes that you have to rotate so they slot into the solid layer below as they fall ever faster. A game for obsessives that slackens the mouth and glazes eyes.

'Ma, I'm only here for a few more days. Can you put that away?'

'Don't let her get started on that,' Lionel says from the kitchen. He tells me how she'd played it for 36 hours non-stop when one of the grandchildren left it at Christmas.

Ma reluctantly puts it on the coffee table.

'So what's an instrument maker?' I ask again.

'I don't know. He made instruments I s'pose. For the air force.'

'So he must have been pretty smart?'

'I hardly think so. He was no Einstein. In fact he was a bit of a drip actually.'

'So how did you get together? And more to the point, why, if you thought he was a drip?'

'I wanted to get away from home, that's why. And he sounded pretty glamorous at the time. He said he was about to be posted to Japan for two years. 'Course I decided then and there I was going to marry him.

'And I said I was related to a famous travel writer of the day, James A. Fitzpatrick. Everyone knew him because his travelogues used to be on at the pictures before just about every film you saw. I told Arthur I was his niece and of course he thought I was rich.' She chuckles at this dual deception.

'So how long did you talk on the phone?'

'Not long. We met pretty soon after we first talked and then a few months later we eloped.'

'Did you love him?'

Ma is distracted again by a commercial for five indestructible cooking pots for the price of one if she calls right now. The telly's on, though the sound is right down. Her fingers itch for a phone.

'Ma, could you turn that off? Please?' I'm exasperated. She has the attention span of a five-year-old.

She raises her eyes to the ceiling and switches the sound off but not the picture.

'Well, did you?'

'What?' Her eyes wander to the telly.

'Love Arthur?'

'No.'

'Not at all?'

'Well, I must've a bit. In the beginning.'

'How old were you?'

'Sixteen.'

'Could you marry at sixteen without consent?'

'I told your grandmother if she signed the papers then I'd wait a year and she agreed.'

'So you lied to your poor old mother.'

'Hmm.'

'Where did you marry?'

'At an air force chaplain's home. There was just us and the minister and his wife.'

'Did you have a honeymoon?'

'Yeah. We went to visit his family in Perth straight after. But he drank the whole time. We didn't go anywhere and he left me alone for days because I didn't drink. That's when I started wondering what the hell I'd done.'

'What did you do?'

'Oh, I hung about at the local radio station. I even sang on the air a few times. It was great.' She smiles, looking into the wall opposite, seeing herself at the microphone. A happy memory. She refuses to engage in anything else.

'What about Japan?'

'Well, when we got back from Perth, that's when I found out he'd lied. He was being posted to bloody Tocumwal, which is way out bloody woop woop.'

'That's where Jenny and Pommy were born, isn't it?'

'Mmm.'

'What about Gran? What happened when she found out?'

'Oh, she got over it. She moved up to help out when the babies were born.'

'How long did you stay there?'

'Three years, I think it was. Until I found out that Arthur'd been sleeping with every Sheila under the sun.'

She starts switching channels on the telly. I glare and she turns it off. Sulky, pursed lips, but only for a second. The arsenal of human emotions touch her only fleetingly, like bullets bouncing off Superman.

'How did you find out?'

'Oh, there was this private who liked me and he told me. I think he felt sorry for me because everyone knew except me. He used to take me into town to do shopping. He told me on one of those trips, I think.'

'Did anything happen with you and him? The private?'

'Not much.'

Now she's picking up the TV guide from the table next to her.

'What do you mean, not much?'

'Nothin'.'

Her brow is furrowed into the guide, her chin pointing to the ceiling to help her see better.

'Ma. Can you put that down? I have to go soon anyway.'

'Oh, all right, but as I said I think it's a waste o' bloody time. The past's the past and I don't know why you're interested, meself.'

'So, what about the private? Sounds like he was pretty keen.'

'He was.'

'How come nothing happened, then?'

'Well, he was just that sort of bloke. He wouldn't do anything 'cause I was married.' She's staring at the carpet now.

'But there was one night we had a party at a next door neighbor's house. I dressed to the nines. I could look pretty good when I did meself up. Arthur'd passed out on the floor and the private, I forget his name, anyway, he caught me eye and more or less told me to follow him outside. I remember there were that many stars it was magic. And then he just held me hands and we started kissin'.'

'How was it?'

'Pretty good, actually. Sparks flew and worlds turned. It was the most exciting kiss I've ever had. To this day, I might add.'

'And then?'

But she's stuck in time, staring again at the white wall in front of her.

'Ma? What happened then?'

'Nothin'.'

'Sounds like you might have loved the guy.' I'm surprised.

'I did. Anyway, it wasn't long after that I told Arthur to pack his bags and never come back.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothin'. He packed his bags and left.'

'When was that? What year?'

'Oh, let's see, you were born just after the Olympic Games in Melbourne at the end of '56, and you're eighteen months younger than Linda. She was just a baby, so it must have been the year before that.'

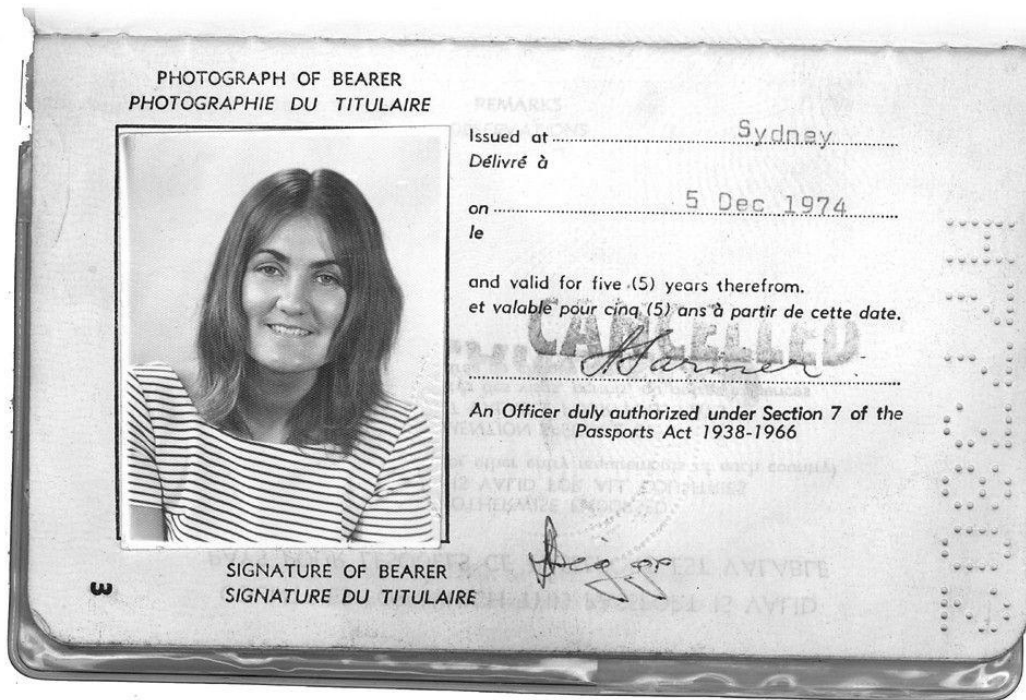
'So what about my father?'

It's not the first time I've asked. I can't believe she knows so little about him.

'Hmm?' she says. But she's already back in the TV guide.

I was spared a boring life because of Ma.

ONE OUT OF THE BOX



1972

Most people think love's just so great but I reckon they don't have a clue. Take Hollywood, all that schmaltzy stuff. The only reason people watch it is because they know they're never going to see it in real life. All that 'I love you so much' stuff, all that looking into each other's eyes and dancing off into the sunset. I mean, maybe it happens sometimes, and I have to admit I do wonder about it now and then, but mostly... well, it makes you tired just thinking about it. No. I reckon if you imagine getting sawn in half like my sister Jenny, who ran off with a circus, you're getting close to knowing what it's like. Or even getting stabbed in the chest. Yeah, maybe even like a combo of the two. That's more what it's like. But maybe it's just me.

Anyway, who cares? The train's getting closer to Brisbane and I can't wait to see Pommy again. She's my favorite big sister. I haven't seen her for almost two years. She's finally back from the convent. She's so bloody smart, the smartest one in our family by a long shot. She's just great. We can talk about everything, Pommy and me. Even though, strictly speaking, she and Jenny should be best friends because they're the two oldest. Jenny's all right, too, I guess, but I won't be seeing her for a while, being as how she's off in the outback with the circus. Wow. How Hollywood. But Pommy's the one I'm busting to see.

It's a lot warmer up in Brisbane. Sitting here on the train, I can feel it already. You know, when you get so warm you can feel it deep down inside your bones. Melbourne's such a miserable place in winter. But here up north it looks different. The plants are more like jungle. Vines and hanging things and really big trees. And I mean big. And the houses are all on stilts and have louvre windows around great huge verandahs on every side.

Who'd have thought I'd be back from Melbourne after just nine months? It seems longer. Much longer. And weird. But then in another way it feels the same too. Like I never left. Last time I lived in Queensland I was in the convent. The first time I ran away I went to see my boyfriend, Col. He didn't live far from our house, so of course they just came and took me back. When they did that I realised how stupid I was. If I'd thought about it I would've known it was the first place they'd look. Anyway, I hated that convent so much I made sure they wouldn't take me back the second time I ran away. I hitched to Melbourne instead. Gran was still there, so I went to her place first.

Mum had decided to move to Brisbane ages ago now, about maybe a year and a half. Pommy was the only one who stayed in Melbourne because Mum left her in a convent there. She found out Pommy was sneaking out at night to be with her boyfriend just before we moved.

The move was pretty exciting. Mum had bought a new car just before we left, so we wouldn't have to pay it off. Not that it was just one move. Mum made so many trips up and back getting all us kids and stuff.

It was on one of those trips I had my first real kiss. I was just a kid then. Thirteen. We'd stopped for a swim at Coffs Harbour, I think it was. That in itself was pretty funny because Mum usually drove like a bat out of hell and didn't stop anywhere unless she had to.

WE'VE BOUGHT FISH AND CHIPS for lunch and we're going to have them at the beach because the car's so hot and sweaty. When we get there the air outside is crispy so the first thing we do is run down to the water like madmen. The water's sparkling blue and the white sand stretches as far as you can see in both directions. The surf 's warm and bubbly and just dangerous enough for fun. We shout and play with all this energy because we've been cooped up for so long. We're the only ones on the whole beach until these two surfers come and park themselves up on a dune. They just lie down on their tummies. I think they're looking at me but maybe I'm just imagining it. Anyway, I can't stop thinking of how I look pretty nice. I start playing over near them. One of them calls out Do you live around here then? I say No we're on our way to Brisbane, we're moving up there. They've both got long, blond, curly hair and they're so brown. I don't know which one I like best. Then we start talking, like How old are you? Fourteen, I lie. Have you ever been kissed? Only in spin-the-bottle. Do you want one then? I'm getting butterflies. By now we're all lying on our tummies on the sand. One of them checks first to see if Mum's watching, then leans over and gives me this really soft, dreamy kiss. It's great and I think I'm in love. Then the other one makes this ring out of dry grass and puts it on my finger and says that means we're engaged. I ask to which one and they say Both and laugh. Then Mum says we have to go and I sit in the car with this smile on my face the rest of the way to Brisbane.

It's so warm on the train now. We must be getting near the border. It's late morning and the heat and the train rocking makes me sleepy. I hardly slept all night. There's sun in my eyes so I close them. It's so warm. I love the sun more than anything.

I kept that grass ring for, well, almost forever! It was a funny kiss though, because he hardly used his tongue at all. I wonder why he didn't because I know by now that's the way you're supposed to kiss. I've kissed tons of guys since then. The last one was Will, who drove me to the station in Melbourne in his little red sports car. But I don't want to think about him again at all. It makes me feel a bit sick. Or maybe even like jumping out of the train. Ha. The only one I never kissed was the Chief.

It seems like a million years ago when I first ran away and ended up living with him in Melbourne, even though it's only been nine months.

Vernon's picking me up from Gran's flat. It's Friday night and the two of us have just had dinner. It was a roast. Gran made it because she knew it'd be our last meal together.

I haven't got any bags. That's part of the problem. I can't get a job. Apart from not having worked before, I haven't got any clothes to work in.

I hitch-hiked from Brisbane to Melbourne two weeks ago. I had to get right away. It took eighteen lifts. I didn't have a cent when I started but I got here with two dollars because some people fed me and gave me a bit of money. I came to Gran's flat because I didn't know anyone else apart from Jacqui. I'd met her at the start of high school a couple of years ago when we lived in Croydon, way out on the outskirts of Melbourne. I didn't want to go there because I knew her Mum would tell everybody where I was and they'd take me back to the convent like they did last time.

I told Gran I wasn't going back. She telephoned Vernon yesterday to tell him about how I needed a job. She's in a pickle because she's living in a Housing Commission flat and she could be kicked out for having me live with her. I can't see what business it should be of anyone else. I *am* family.

So here he is, Vernon, pretty much like I remember him from when I was little. He's tall. Big, not really fat, but pudgy because he's old. I don't know how old but he's bald like Friar Tuck. He's got a moustache too, like you used to see in those old English war movies. He looks like a colonel. His eyes are piggy, a bit watery. I can tell he's trying not to look too excited at the sight of me, his new nanny. I already know what's what.

He's wearing a suit. I've never met anyone who wears a suit except my grade six teacher. He's wearing cufflinks, too, and scent, which I think is pretty funny but nice. It's like he comes from a movie where people are normal. Not like our family, who go around doing things you never see in movies.

With Gran, Vernon's friendly but it's like he's doing business. You can tell he doesn't want to hang around. He only wants to stay long enough to pick me up without actually running out the door.

'Might as well get her home and settled in then.' His scent smells weird mixed with the smoke smell of the little room Gran lives in. It's just one room with a kitchen in a corner and a bathroom down the end. Gran's always smoking, so the walls are brown. I always think of Gran when I smell a cigarette butt in a toilet because she used to smoke in there when we were kids and throw the butt in the bowl.

Gran kisses me goodbye. 'Be good,' she says with a smile that isn't a real smile. I don't know what it means exactly but it makes me feel funny. Sometimes it's best not to think too much about things like that.

I wake up with a jolt. The train's stopping because we're here. In Brisbane. I start thinking about some kind of welcome home. I'd phoned, so I know no-one can pick me up at the station. But I'm a bit excited and can't wait to see everybody, so I get a taxi. They've moved from Mount Gravatt since I ran away. Now they're living in Graceville, which isn't that far out of the city.

When I get there the house looks run down from the outside, depressing, but I don't care. I hurry up the path and across the verandah to the front door. It's wide open and I almost fall into a hole in the floor just inside. It's so funny I can't believe it and start laughing.

Betty, Mum's friend, is sitting on the couch. She and her daughter Nicole, who's seven and has a lisp even worse than mine, moved to Queensland with us. Betty's got this kind of air like the Queen which is weird because she doesn't look anything like a Queen. It's the way she talks. She sits with her sausage ankles crossed like a lady. She's sitting on battered furniture with broken arms and ripped seats but she still talks like a lady. She's laughing at the hole too.

'Oh, Barbara dear, you're here. Don't mind that, it's rather handy for when we sweep the floors. Pleasant trip, was it?' The way she says it you'd think I'd been on holidays. Betty's got jet-black hair with big curls that fall around her face. She's always laughing at our family's funny ways. She laughs less when she talks to me, most when she talks to Pommy and Mick. He's a year younger than me. He's away at boarding school with the Salesian Brothers in Melbourne. He only comes home on school holidays and that's when he makes Betty laugh the way he dresses in

sheets and pretends to be a ghost even though he's too old for that kind of thing.

'Where is everyone?' I move a mountain of washing and flop into a lop-sided armchair. There are papers and games and dirty dishes with chop bones on every chair and on the floor. I've never seen our place look like such a brothel. It doesn't look like they were expecting me at all.

'Linda and Neville could be anywhere, the little ones are at school, at least I hope they are, and Tub's getting her beauty sleep,' she says. Tub's her name for Mum. Whenever Betty's frustrated with Mum being lazy she says to her, 'You're nothing but a great big tub of lard'. That's how come she calls her Tub, but only Betty can get away with it because she's almost as fat as Mum, but shorter.

'Who's Neville?'

'Linda's beau. He's living here. The poor girl's pregnant to him.' Betty has a soft spot for her. I do, too, but I haven't seen Pommy for ages. Since long before I ran away to Melbourne. That's because she'd been put in her convent in Melbourne just before the big move north. Six months later Mum put me into my convent in Brisbane because she thought my boyfriend Col was too old for me. He was 26. But Pommy had to go into her convent even though her boyfriend was still in high school and they didn't even have sex. Both our convents were Good Shepherd homes for 'wayward girls'. When Pommy got out and came to Brisbane, I'd already run away to Melbourne.

I can't understand why she isn't here to see me but I guess she's just at the shop or something.

'When will they be home?'

'Heaven only knows. It's like a hotel here. I never know who's coming and going.'

'What about Jenny? When's she coming back?' Jenny's had a baby and I guess that's probably him in the corner of the lounge room. I go over to have a coo.

'Well dear, your guess is as good as mine. It's all very curious. I believe one of her jobs is to be a genie in a bottle.'

'I know, but what about the baby?' I pick him up. He's soft and warm and smells of baby sweat, almost sweet.

'Well, I don't know really. I seem to be changing a lot of nappies. I expect she'll be back. I certainly hope so.'

'Is Mum awake?'

'One would hardly know, dear.' She chuckles away to herself. She's a bit of a chuckler, Betty. You don't normally go around saying 'chuckle' but I read it in the *Famous Five*. It's a good word if you ask me.

'She spends all day in bed, so it hardly matters really. Go and see, dear.'

I go into Mum's bedroom and lose my left leg up to the knee in another hole just inside her door.

'Fuck,' I say. I can see the big hill that's Mum buried under the bedclothes. 'It's me,' I say.

'Is that you, Barb? Watch out for the hole there. When did you get here?'

'Thanks,' I say, climbing out. 'Just now.' I kiss her on the cheek. It seems too Hollywood but what else are you supposed to do when you haven't seen your mother for nine months? The last time I'd seen her she came to the convent to say goodbye with Betty and a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Back then she'd been going off to gas herself because what was the point when we were all ungrateful bastards and the kids at my brother Peter's new school laughed at him because his mother was fat.

Apart from opening one eye, Mum doesn't rouse herself much.

'Why don't you make your poor mother a cuppa?' She's got a way of asking when you really know she's telling you to do it. If you don't she asks until you can't stand it any more. But this time I can't say no because I've just got here.

'Oh, shit. You can't,' she says in a husky, sleepy voice.

'There's no sugar. Have you got any money?'

'Forty dollars.' I'm proud of being an adult now with my own money. It's all that's left of what the Chief gave me after I'd paid for my train ticket. He gave me three weeks' wages for nothing when he kicked me out.

'There's not a skerrick of food in the house, actually, she says, still half asleep. 'We can't go to the milk bar down the road because we owe 'em so much on credit. Why don't you go and pay 'em and get some sugar while you're at it?' Her left foot's hanging out of the bed and shaking up and down so fast it looks like it's got a motor in it.

'How much do you owe?' I say. I know where this is heading.

'Oh, I don't know, probably about that.'

'It's all the money I've got.'

'Well, bloody keep it then.'

She's sulking. You don't normally see that much emotion in Mum in a month of Sundays. But when she does that I always feel guilty. So I go down the road to pay the grocery bill and buy sugar, milk, eggs and bread.

I sit out in the back yard to wait for Pommy. I take our black mongrel, Sag (short for Sagittarius like me) off the rope tied to the clothes line and he goes nuts. I pat him for a while but he's so full of energy we play in the long grass that doesn't look like it's ever been mowed. I start ignoring him when I'm tired and he falls asleep in the sun.

It's two whole years since I'd seen Pommy. Mum had sent her and me to live in this hick town called Stratford in Victoria with her friend Maxine, whose husband had been a womanizing bastard. To get away from him, Maxine'd gone back to the country to live with her mum. Maxine told our Mum we could go and live with her. She told us she

was helping out 'poor Pat' who was always working day and night, night and day for her six ungrateful brats. Especially Pommy, who was stubborn as a mule and hated Mum.

In Stratford, Pommy and me used to go along the river behind the saw mill and skip stones in the water or go on long walks and talk. I could be with Pommy all day long. But then Pommy met Val Popov. He was the most handsome boy in the whole school, even if he did have a girl's name. Pommy was three years younger than the older girls but he still liked her best.

Pommy and me would lie in our sleep-out that we'd painted orange and purple and she'd tell me about Val.

'We kiss but we don't have sex. We lie on his bed with no clothes on just holding hands as if it's the most natural thing in the world.'

'Does he touch you?'

'Sometimes. But mostly we just talk.'

'What about?'

'Everything. There's nothing I can't talk to him about. I

think I'm in love.'

'How can you tell?'

'I think about him all day. That must mean something.'

It wasn't that long after it started with Val, Pommy got caught sneaking out to meet him. That's when Mum decided to put her in the convent. Which is how she got left behind when we all moved to Brisbane.

Sag wakes up and starts wagging his tail and barking. It means Pommy must be home so I rush into the house.

Kissing isn't the thing in our family, so Pommy and me just say 'Hi' like we'd seen each other yesterday.

'G'day Barbara,' says Neville. 'I bet you're bloody surprised.'

Oh, that Neville. He'd been best mates with the Gravatt Boys who'd got me drunk at Col's birthday. They called themselves the Gravatt Boys because they came from Mount Gravatt. Very original. I was invited because it was my birthday on the same day. Col was turning 26 and me fourteen. That was the first time I met Col. He and his friends kept saying 'bottoms up' and then laughing like idiots. I thought they were laughing because they didn't think I could keep up. So I showed them. It was only after they got this pimply seventeen-year-old smart Alec called Rick to drive me home that I realised why they'd really been laughing. He raped me, of course. Guys like that just can't leave a virgin alone.

Last time I'd seen Neville he'd asked about my sister in Melbourne.

'She wouldn't be interested in someone like you,' I'd said.

'Why not?'

'She's better than that,' I'd told him.

Now, I pretend I don't know what he's talking about.

'You said Linda was too good for me. Now look at her. I've got her up the bloody duff!' He crows like a bloody chook. How could Pommy do it with Neville when all she'd done with the most handsome boy in school was lie on the bed naked and talk about everything as though it was the most natural thing in the world? As if it isn't bad enough I'm thinking like this, Pommy knows I'm thinking it. I follow them into the bedroom. She starts making the bed and not asking anything about what's happened to me in the past year.

But I know how to get her going. I can make her laugh. It always works. Then I wheedle out of her that in the convent she'd started a girl's newsletter and published it. She'd even got an acting group together and taught herself to type from a book. She's always been such a go getter. Everyone's always liked Pommy. At our new schools every year she'd end up the most popular girl in her class. Not like me. I'd go into a coma when I had to make new friends at school. I'd also lie a lot. 'Do you like the Beatles or Elvis?' God, were they animals or trees or nick names of other girls in the class? 'Elvis', I'd lie. 'What a dag! The Beatles are the coolest.' And off they'd go. Even lying I'd never get anything right. But Pommy's different. She always knows the right thing to say.

Pommy still doesn't ask about what I've been up to with the Chief in Melbourne. Just as well.

ME AND POMMY just got out of the bath. I want to do dancing but Pommy says I have to do what she says. She says I have to wait. I hate it when I have to wait.

Gran says I have to go to bed but Pommy can stay up. Every night when I go to bed I dream about Pommy. I know it's a dream but it's just like I'm awake. I'm a puppet and she's in the roof of our house and she's making the strings work. When I go to bed I don't want to dream about being a puppet but I can't help it. I hate it when I have to go to bed.

Pommy's getting more towels from the bathroom. We roll the top over and let the long bit hang down our backs. That's our veil 'cause we're princesses like in 'Tales of the Arabian Nights'. We haven't got music but now we're running and jumping and dancing like real princesses.

Then I look up and Mum's standing there with a man. Pommy runs behind the couch and I go too. We haven't got our jarmies on yet. We think they're going into Mum's room but they don't. They just stand there. He's got black clothes on. He's big and has a moustache. He's got little eyes and he's smiling at us but he doesn't really look happy.

'What are you still doing up? Go to bed,' Mum says. Then they go into her room.

Pommy and me laugh. He looked funny. We keep dancing. Then we hear Mum's door open. We run and hide behind the couch again.

'This is Mr Vernon,' Mum says. We peep over the top of the couch. 'And this is Linda and Barb.'

We have to say 'Hello' so we do.

'Hello, girls.' He's pretty loud. He's trying to be nice but I don't like his smile. 'What were you doing when we came in before?'

'Dancing,' I say. I dance like a real princess.

'Well, don't let us stop you,' he says. 'Will you dance for us?' We shake our heads.

'Cat got your tongue?'

'Go on,' Mum says. 'Show us how you dance.' Pommy and me look at each other.

'No.' Pommy says it in a whisper. Sshhh. If she says 'no' we don't have to.

'Why not?' he asks.

'We haven't got any clothes on,' I say.

'You can put your pyjamas on,' Mum says. We shake our heads. We don't want to. 'Why not?' he says again. 'Don't be shy. Look, here's two bob for both of you. One each.'

We look at Mum and then we look at the money he's got in his hands. He's got two two-shilling coins. I want to get mine but Pommy holds my arm and won't let me go. Pommy doesn't like him and I don't either, but I want my two bob.

'Well, here, have the money anyway,' he says. He's smiling again. I think about how many lollies I can buy.

'Come on,' he says. 'Don't you want it?' I go to get my money again but Pommy pulls me back. I look at her and stay where I am.

Mum looks at Vernon.

'Well, get your pyjamas on and go to bed,' she says.

We stay behind the couch because we've got no clothes on and we don't want the man to see our botties.

'Go on,' she says.

We just look at them because our pyjamas are over near the window. She whispers something in the man's ear and then he goes back into Mum's room.

'I don't want to see you two here when I come out. Bed.'

When they leave, we run and get our pyjamas on and go to bed.

In the afternoon Mum's up and we all go to the supermarket to get some food for dinner. Mum has a big bag and steals packets of meat from the freezer section as well as a couple of fresh packets for tonight. She can't go every day because they catch on if you get to be a regular. I'm so hungry by then I eat two apples walking around the aisles. When we come to the checkout, the girl with the smiley button is too embarrassed by Mum's size to check her extra big handbag, which is almost exploding with food. Betty doesn't come on the shopping expeditions because she goes red at the checkout and is a dead giveaway.

My little sister Bloss comes home after school and we just say 'Hi'. I'm not close to her. I don't remember anything about our childhood together. She's just this annoying kid who wants to get in on the act all the time. The act is always about Pommy and Jenny or Pommy and me. I don't want to share Pommy with anyone else when I already have Jenny to worry about. Same with my two brothers.

But Bloss asks me all about Melbourne. I tell her how I saw the musical *Hair* where all the people on stage take their clothes off and about my boss who's a barrister. I don't tell her anything else about me and the Chief, though.

She loves to talk, Bloss. She's great. She tells me all about how Mum landed a job cleaning offices, but without a car and being so fat she couldn't get to and from the jobs very well, so Bloss took over the round. She was going to school in the day and cleaning offices every night but after all that cleaning she was always falling asleep on her desk. She'd kept it up for a few months and then quit when a girlfriend hatched a plan for them to hitch up north a thousand kilometres away. But, after two weeks, Bloss came back home one night when everyone was watching telly.

'When I walked in Mum just said "Hi". I said "Aren't you going to ask where I've been?" and you know that kind of look she gets when she knows she's s'posed to say something mumsy? Then she says "I'll bite. Where've you been?". I told her and you know what she said then?'

'What?'

' "I thought I hadn't seen you for a while". '

We laugh and laugh.

The next day's Saturday and I'm in the lounge and Bloss comes and poses in the doorway wearing some kind of outfit.

'What do you think?' she says.

She's wearing lipstick and the tiniest mini skirt you've ever seen. Her halter top only comes below her boobs and her tummy's sticking out and it's so tight around those big boobs it looks like they're going to burst out of it. She's only

eleven but I can see she thinks she looks gorgeous and grown up. The worst part is, she does look a lot older than she is but she doesn't look good at all.

'Don't you think the skirt's a bit too small?'

'It's the fashion.' She's offended because I haven't said 'Wow!'

Thinking about her going out like that makes me mad. I can hardly stop myself from saying what I really think but she's still standing at the door in a sexy pose, smiling and waiting for me to say something good. She doesn't know what guys are like yet.

'But maybe if the top was a bit longer?'

'All the girls at school are wearing them. They're called midriffs. Don't you think it looks great?'

'No, I think you look too old.' I know I'm sounding mean but I want to rip those clothes off her.

'I don't care about that. What I want to know is if it looks nice.'

'Bloss, you're bulging out all over the place. You look like a tart.'

She storms off, crying.

'You're just a big, fat, jealous bitch,' she yells back at me from inside her room.

Pommy says only bitches say 'bitch' but I know Bloss isn't one and I realise Pommy doesn't always know everything. I can hear Bloss sobbing away and I feel terrible because it's only my first day back here and it's all gone wrong.

I use the last of my money to buy fish and chips for dinner. By then Bloss has calmed down. We blab away as if nothing's happened.

She tells me all about how Pommy went around outback Queensland with the circus. She got into the *I Dream of Jeannie* costume, pregnant and all. She took Jenny's place in the same circus and even got sawn in half like her.

She tells me all these stories about what happened when I was away and we laugh our heads off because isn't our family one out of the box.

I LIVE UNDER WATER



I've never known things to be so grim in our house. There are clothes going mouldy in the washhouse because there's only a machine with an old wringer that's hard to use. The place smells. Over the next few weeks I find out that Betty, who's a telephonist like Mum (it's how they met), is the only one in the house with a job. That's if you don't count Neville, because what he earns is strictly his own and Pommy's. Betty's wage and some pensions Mum's managing to scam have to buy food for herself and Nicole, Mum, Bloss, Peter, Jenny's baby Warren, Jenny when she isn't away with the circus and now me. Not to mention her three cats and Sag the dog, who's always hungry out by the clothes line.

I also hear about how when Jenny came home from one of her trips to the outback she had a boyfriend who threatened to dob Mum into social welfare and have Peter and Bloss put in a home. When Pommy got back from her circus trip and found out, she chased the boyfriend down the street with a meat cleaver. Bloss and Peter were trailing behind, begging like crazy for everyone to stop but Pommy threw it anyway. She missed, but it did the trick. He moved out and everything went back to normal. Pommy's great like that.

We lie about our names and ages and Pommy and me get a job in telephone sales for the Jaycees. We have to sell books of tickets that give you free haircuts and brake checks and a free restaurant meal if you pay for one, stuff like that, so it's easy. They've all been donated because it's a fund raising thing. I find out I'm really good at it. There's about fifty girls in the room and I sell more books than anyone else because you get bonuses for every ten you sell. It doesn't last long and when it's over we can't find a job anywhere.

That's when Pommy and me start back on our old 'shopping' trips again. It's amazing how good clothes can make you feel good when you're feeling down. They really do. The way we do it is we put the hem of the dress into our bag and then we slide the shoulders off the coat hanger and it falls into the bag while we're checking out to see if anyone's watching us. Pommy can spot the floorwalkers a mile off and sometimes we follow them around the store while they're following other shoplifters, who we can also spot a mile off. Pommy's smart like that.

After shopping we have cups of tea and cream buns at a coffee shop with all our bags at our feet and she always pays. I never think of paying because she's older and organises everything. She's always been the boss in our house.

JENNY'S SHOUTING OUT that someone's looking through the window! We've all just had a bath and we have to go to bed so we run and get Gran. Now maybe we won't have to go to bed straight away. We're always thinking of reasons why we won't have to go to bed. We've got millions of tricks. Anyway, this is like a Deadly Earnest movie where the baddies are always looking through the window.

Gran goes out and then she comes back and says it's just Vernon. She says he's a friend of Mum's. We already know that 'cause we hear Gran and Mum saying his name sometimes.

‘He wants to buy you all an ice-cream.’

We look at each other. Even though Mum talks about him, Pommy and me are the only ones who’ve seen him. But that was ages ago. We don’t like him much.

‘Yeah. I want chocolate,’ they all say. Us kids’ll do anything for chocolate.

Everybody’s cheering and shouting.

‘He just needs Barb to go with him to help him carry them back. Come on, Barb.’

‘I’ll go,’ says Mick.

‘No, me, I’ll go!’ Bloss wants to go too but she’s way too little.

‘We’ll all go,’ says Jenny.

‘No, he only wants to take Barb,’ Gran says.

Pommy whispers in my ear, ‘Don’t go, Barb. He’s creepy.’ So I tell Gran I don’t want to go.

All the kids scream and say ‘Go on, go on’. They’re jumping ‘round all over the place.

‘I’ll go if Pommy can come too.’ That’s what I say. Pommy pinches my arm. It really hurts.

Gran goes out to the front verandah where Vernon is. She comes back and tells us both to come to the door.

‘I only want to take one little girl,’ he says. ‘I haven’t got any kiddies and I don’t know how to look after two little girls.’

‘She’s not going unless I go too.’ Pommy’s holding my arm and pinching me all the time. I hate her when she doesn’t let me do what I want. She thinks because she’s just started at high school and I don’t go there ‘til next year that she knows everything and she can do whatever she wants.

‘Well, if Barb doesn’t come you all miss out,’ he says. He’s smiling but only with his mouth and it doesn’t look real.

The other kids have all come into the hallway and they’re whispering at us to go. They’re trying not to shout. It looks like maybe we could go because everyone wants us to and what difference does it make to him if two of us go or one?

Then Pommy stands in front of me.

‘She’s not going on her own.’

‘You get inside,’ Gran says to Pommy. ‘No one’s talking to you. Come on Barb, what’s the harm?’

But Pommy doesn’t go inside. Gran and her stare like they could kill each other. Gran and Pommy are always fighting. Gran gets that look like you better watch out.

In the end we don’t go. The other kids are really shitty with us. Gran is too. Vernon, he just smiles that smile and lifts his hands in the air and shrugs his shoulders as if to say it isn’t his fault we’ve all missed out on getting our ice-creams.

There are no ordinary jobs around so I lie about my age again and finally get a job working as a model for an agency that charges guys to take pictures of girls without their clothes on in a room where there are signs everywhere that say ‘No touching!’ The boss is a Pom and very strict about that so he’s got peepholes into the rooms where he can keep an eye on us. The other girls say he sells extra peephole viewings that we don’t get paid for. I don’t feel a bit uncomfortable without my clothes, but when the boss moves onto movies I can’t take my clothes off elegantly like the other girls. Men who watch my screen test laugh and I’m embarrassed as hell. That’s why I leave that job.

I start going out at night so I’ve got somewhere to wear my new clothes. I’m bored and looking for action too. I find a place called Willie’s Bazaar in The Valley. Willie is about Mum’s age and short and round with blonde hair twice as big as her head and eyelashes that could sweep a plate clean. She wears tight, spangled dresses and terrifies the living daylight out of me because you never know what you might be doing wrong with a lady who looks like that. Her bazaar is a dark hippie hangout that plays music by Cat Stevens, Simon and Garfunkel, The Doors and Creedence Clearwater Revival. I don’t know any of them because we don’t listen to the radio in our house, but I soon learn their names. There are low tables with lots of big cushions on the floor. The place reeks of Patchouli oil, which is supposed to be very cool but I don’t like it. The people wear sandals and head bands and long skirts or soft loose pants from India. I don’t look like them because I’ve got all my expensive clothes from shopping.

One night after I’ve left that job, I go outside to get some fresh air. It’s hot inside because it’s in a basement. I go off with a guy who pulls up in a fancy car and wants to have sex with me because I’m wearing a classy-looking purple hat with a brim and don’t look like the other hippie chicks hanging around outside. We have sex in the car and when he drops me off one of the hippie guys called John, who I’ve been talking to for weeks, gets jealous and says he’s fancied me since we first met but now that I’ve gone off with the guy in the fancy car, what’s the point. I cry and tell him I love him. I don’t even know why I say it except I really like the feeling that he likes me so much.

I want to get out of the Graceville house because it’s pretty depressing. I’m not used to such a depressing house. When Gran lived with us when we were kids she always made sure things were clean. She was a great cook and always made a Sunday roast. She gave us our bath and jobs to do. Mum just doesn’t have a clue about how to get us to do anything. We’re brats with her and the house is a mess. I hate it. We almost always did what Gran said. Except Pommy. She never did what anybody said.

I begin to see that John might be a way I can get out of home. He’s handsome and nice to me so I think maybe I can move in with him. He’s got the perfect hippie house close to Willie’s, but he’s 25 and freaks out when I tell him I’m only fifteen. All bets are off with moving in with him and he almost ends it then and there.

‘I could be done for fucking carnal knowledge!’ Everyone at Willie’s says ‘fucking’ all the time. Col and Rick always say

‘fuckin’ without the ‘g’, which I don’t like, but ‘fucking’ sounds cool. It definitely isn’t cool to say fuckin’ but I’d been fucking this and fucking that since I’d met John. But when John says fucking this time he isn’t trying to be cool. He seems mad and scared. He shakes his long, wavy ginger-colored hair in a way that hides his gorgeous powder blue eyes in his sweet Polish face. His Mum had come from Poland after World War Two.

‘I’ll be sixteen in a couple of months.’

‘I don’t want to be without you, Barbie. We’ll work something out.’

I move in and we make a mattress on the floor for me in one of the girl’s rooms so that if police ever come we can say I don’t live with John. He sees to it that I go on the Pill. The Chief always said you didn’t need to be on the Pill because pulling out’s better. He said in all his twenty-five years of having sex he’d never knocked up a girl that he didn’t want to get pregnant. But John isn’t taking any chances.

Sex is the main problem with me and John. He doesn’t know anything about girls having orgasms. When I ask about it he gets mad.

‘Are you saying I don’t satisfy you? You don’t think I’m a good lover?’ He goes stiff and his baby eyes turn hard.

We’re in the bath together.

‘No, I’m not saying that. It’s just that I don’t always come.’ I can’t tell him I never do.

‘Maybe you only like fucking old men. Or maybe you like being raped. I never want to hurt you, Barbie. I can’t do that.’

That wasn’t what I meant at all. Why do guys always turn things around so it’s your fault?

I’m so depressed afterwards I never mention it again. Instead I lie there thinking about how it used to be with the Chief when I was in Melbourne.

In the car on the way from Gran’s flat to his house (he says it’s in Kew which I think must be ritzy) Vernon’s acting like a new boss. He’s telling me about my new job.

‘The girls have been staying with their grandparents since their mother went to hospital a couple of months ago. I miss them terribly.’

Terribly. No-one I know says ‘terribly’. That’s another thing that’s like the movies. People in the movies say that. I’d say something was terrible, but not, I miss them terribly.

The car smells new. The front has two separate seats instead of one long one like in Mum’s car.

‘I suppose Gran’s told you you’ll be getting \$20 a week — and full board, of course.’ I wonder why he’s calling my grandmother Gran. She isn’t his Gran. Though I s’pose he’s been around our house on and off for years.

‘Your sole job will be to look after the girls. Nita’s four and she’ll be starting kindy for the first time in a few weeks. Kate’s two, she’s toilet trained but she still wears a nappy at night.’

He sounds like such an ordinary guy. I don’t feel completely normal with saying ‘guy’ but I like it. All the boys up north in Queensland say guy. It sounds Hollywoodish. If you knew how much I wanted to live in Hollywood you’d understand why I’m going to keep saying guy even though it sounds funny.

I nearly ran away to Hollywood once. For months I’d planned how I’d stow away on a ship. I used to think about it every night for ages. Even in the daytime. Sometimes all day. I’d imagine getting to know some sailor so he could bring me food and how it would be in a little room I’d find at the bottom of the ship. That was only two years ago when I was twelve, but you’d be surprised what a little kid can do when she wants something really badly. I know I didn’t do it, but if you knew how much I wanted to you’d know I could have. I used to talk to Pommy about it and we’d spend hours planning what we’d do when we got there and how we’d be ‘discovered’ and get into the movies with Doris Day and Carey Grant. But then when I wanted to start really doing it she said it was a stupid idea.

Anyway, Vernon. He sounded normal even though we’d always thought of him as the bogey man. But here he was talking about his kids like anyone else.

‘There’s not a lot to do. They’re good kids and they’ll go to Jane’s parents every other weekend. Jane might come home from the hospital occasionally. You’ll have to clean and just take care of my babies for me while I’m at work. I’ve usually got court in the morning at 10 o’clock so I don’t leave for the office until about nine and I’m home late afternoon, sometimes early, depending on the case.’

He turns and looks me up and down. I turn away to stare at the red traffic light in front of us. I start to feel creepy. It’s a weird feeling I get whenever our family moves. Moving’s something I hate all right. I didn’t have to see all those Adventures of Sinbad movies to know what it’s like. Sinbad moved about as much as our family, I reckon. I know just how he felt jumping into all those abysses. That’s how I feel right now. I don’t know where I’m going to land. All I’m really sure about is that there’s nowhere back in Brisbane I want to run to in a hurry.

I feel him staring at me. I turn and look. His blue, watery eyes look right into mine.

‘You know what else you’ll be expected to do ...?’ I think I’ve got a pretty good idea.

When we get to the house there’s a tall white brick fence and behind that’s the longest front garden you’ve ever seen. The grass is mowed and everything looks so neat. There’s a huge tree in the middle, spreading its branches right down to the ground. We go in the front door and turn right into a lounge room. It’s big and I’d call it gracious. Rooms in Hollywood houses are always gracious. There are windows that look onto the front garden. On a built-in bookshelf there’s photos of kids and some pretty-looking lady. I guess it’s their mother. The dining room’s down one end of the lounge to the left. There’s a drawing of Vernon in his barrister’s clothes hanging on the wall. At least I think it’s him. He looks important but he isn’t bald in the picture.

'You look younger there,' I say.

'It was done about ten years ago. I was 32. Had more hair then.' He's waltzing past me like Fred Astaire. He's kind of cool. Even though really he's too old and fat to be like Fred Astaire. But he's trying. I like it because he seems happy.

'This is the kitchen.' He's walking into a room off to the right of the dining room. It has a big, modern, wooden table.

On the left of the dining room there are a few steps that lead up to another level. That's where the bathroom and two bedrooms are.

'This is the master bedroom.' We walk into the room on the left at the top of the stairs. He puts down his briefcase and takes change out of his pocket and pours it into a jar in a huge built-in wardrobe all along the left-hand wall. There's a big double bed in the middle of the room with reading lamps and tables on both sides. He takes me across the little corridor to the room across the hall.

'This is where you'll sleep tonight. The girls won't come until Monday. I thought it'd be better if you got settled in here for a couple of days before they came home.'

Inside the room are two single beds either side of the window.

'Where will I sleep when they come?'

'On the couch.' He walks down to the kitchen.

The house is smaller than I thought it would be. I hadn't thought about not having a room, but your own couch couldn't be worse than the convent dorm.

It's the middle of the night but he says 'Why don't you make us both a cup of tea while I water the garden? It's how I

wind down. I'll just be ten minutes. I have milk, no sugar.'

'Same as me,' I say.

I open the outside door off the kitchen and see a ramp going down to the side of the house. I can't see much of it but the dining room looks onto the back garden. I walk to the front of the house and look at Vernon through the curtains in the dark lounge room. He's just a shadow hosing the grass. I look through the half-dark at the photo of the lady I guess is Jane, and of the girls. Now I look at Jane again, she isn't just pretty, she's beautiful. Much younger than Vernon, I guess. The youngest kid has a cute, pretty face like Jane's, but the older one is more like Vernon.

He comes in and we sit in the lounge room drinking our tea. I feel grown up when he offers me a menthol cigarette, even though I hardly smoke much.

'What do you want me to call you?' I say.

'What do you want to call me?'

'Well, I've always called you Vernon.' He laughs. 'Who calls me that?'

'All of us. But I can't call you that. Robert or Bob doesn't seem quite right, either.'

'Well? What then?'

'You're the boss, right Chief? *Get Smart's* one of my favorite TV shows.

He laughs again. 'Perfect. I love it. I'll be the Chief.'

He shows me the bathroom with the nifty laundry chute, something I've never seen before. It's getting late and he tells me he's going to bed and says I should do the same.

'I'll leave you alone tonight,' he says. He winks and pats me on the arm.

I snuggle into bed feeling that the Chief 's a pretty ordinary guy. I feel like this might not be such a bad move after all.

I can hear the Chief getting ready for bed. I lie there and try to sleep but I can never sleep the first night in a new house.

Sex with John becomes like a game. Him trying to get sex and me trying to get out of it without him thinking I'm trying to. It wears me out. You feel bad when you don't tell the person you live with how you feel. It's even worse if you try and they don't get it. My head's so tight it feels like I've got a cauldron bubbling away in there but I'm not about to ruin everything with John by saying anything again. I don't even know myself how I really feel or why. One thing I do think though, is that good sex is the only way I know how to feel close to someone.

We take acid on weekends with another couple. Alan's a skinny, tall, Jesus-type person who, if he had on a white robe, would look exactly like the holy pictures the nuns used to dish out at the convent. I have a crush on him but that has to be a huge secret from everybody. The other girl in our group is Roslyn but we call her Ros. I think she and Alan like each other but I think she's too plain for him. He's so gorgeous. Ros has freckles and small ferret eyes and is always talking about peace and love but then if you talk about aborigines her eyes get narrow and she gets a mean look on her face. I like her anyway. One night when we've taken acid I'm wearing a long, tartan taffeta skirt and she says it sounds like Christmas paper. We walk all around the streets for hours listening to my skirt.

The four of us have some great times together, playing peace songs in a park at night while we're tripping or at home listening to The Doors, holding hands feeling the energy flow between us. I feel bad that when we sit in a circle I always manage to sit next to Alan and squeeze and stroke his hand so softly and slowly he won't know I'm doing it. It's

tricky because he has to know I'm doing it but not be entirely sure, so if he asks me about it I'd have to pretend I didn't know what he was talking about. He has to just know because he feels the same. He never says anything, though.

Because I feel pretty okay about taking my clothes off and I can't find any other kind of work, the next job I find is as a topless barmaid. I say I'm eighteen again. You're not completely topless because that's illegal, so you have to wear a see-through top. I don't have one on my first day so I borrow one of John's hippie shirts from India that's almost see-through. It's a pink cheesecloth top with a black Indian pattern around the bottom and long slits up the sides.

Everyone's afraid of Virginia, the manager, who's very tall for a lady. She's elegant. Her hair's long and black and flicked up at the ends like Samantha in *Bewitched* on telly. Her clothes are classy and she wears red lipstick and nails. On my first day she sees me half way through my shift when I'm working in the public bar.

'What on earth is that?' she yells from the other end of the bar, pointing at me.

'It's the new girl,' one of the other barmaids tells her.

'Why is she wearing that ... that ... What is that? She looks like something the cat dragged in. You — get upstairs and don't come down until you're properly dressed. What's wrong with you imbeciles letting something like that into the bar?'

I don't start to cry until one of the customers calls me 'luv' and says not to take any notice of the old bitch. One of the girls takes me upstairs and finds a spare black see-through nightie with fluffy fur around the edges that tickles my bum. When I come back down the customers cheer.

I become the fastest barmaid because I can carry five glasses in one hand by putting three stems between my fingers, one on my palm and balancing one on my wrist. Alice teaches me. She's the next fastest after me. Alice has no titties whatsoever because of her six kids who've sucked her dry. I feel sorry for her having to bare her poor little empty titties for an extra \$10 a week and why on earth do they want her to, anyway?

At home with John I'm dying of loneliness. He's working as a forklift driver and together we're saving money to find work in Melbourne. John's mother lives there and he thinks there might be more work down south. He doesn't like me working as a topless barmaid but puts up with it until we can move to Melbourne.

When I'm depressed I go to see Alan but God it's frustrating. He treats me like a friend and that makes me feel even more alone. Having sex with John makes it worse. I haven't felt that lonely since I was with the Chief. I start feeling so desperate everything I listen to makes me even more depressed until I start wanting to listen to depressing stuff. Leonard Cohen's great. I can listen to him for hours because it seems like he's singing all the jumbled feelings inside me. If I tried to tell someone what he meant I couldn't. But I just know his words are poetry written just for me. They open my heart like a sore throat and the crying fills the whole bloody world.

I sing the songs loud and in a stirring way until I can cry a lot when no-one else is home. Afterwards, I almost feel like a hero. I feel better, but it doesn't last long.

I go to a doctor and tell him my mother's died and can I have some sleeping pills. He looks me straight in the eye and says he doesn't believe me. It's very embarrassing when someone doesn't believe you even when you know they shouldn't because you're lying.

'If you need to sleep, run every morning and night for an hour.'

I think he's a bastard and say so when I leave. I yell and scream at him and cry all the way out of his office.

Alan's taking sleeping pills and I go straight to his house to ask for some.

'I just feel really lonely, I don't know why. I'm depressed as hell and can't sleep.'

'Why? What about John? Isn't he your friend? And what about Ros and me?'

'I don't know why John's not enough. I don't want it to be like that. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with him or you guys.' That's all I can say. He seems sad that I can't sleep because I'm lonely and gives me most of his pills. He puts his arm around me in a brotherly kind of way, which puts the icing on the cake.

That night, when John goes to work on night shift, I leave my Leonard Cohen writings on the bed with a note telling him what I'm about to do. Then I go out and book into a sleazy hotel in the city.

'I'm a student and can't work at home,' I tell the people at the reception desk. 'I have to be on my own to study for three days to get ready for the exams.' I'd prepared the whole thing. They look at me like they don't believe a word I say but maybe they don't care what I'm doing there. I pay for the three days up front.

The room has nothing but a single bed with old blankets but clean white sheets, an old scratched chest of drawers with a mirror and a bedside table. The carpet is striped in multi- colors with patches worn away at the doorway and in front of the bed. On the walls there's grubby marks at furniture and hand height with a greasy patch above the pillow.

I take handfuls of sleeping pills, maybe 30. It's not easy taking that many pills, especially when you've got a little mouth like me. They don't go down that easy after the first couple of handfuls either. You start to dry retch. I manage to keep them down then I take my clothes off and jump into bed in my undies and T-shirt. I cry and feel sorry for myself a lot. I'm pretty self-centred but I don't care because if you can't have a good old self-pitying cry when you're about to knock yourself off, when can you?

I don't know if it's night or day. I can't tell how long I've been here. I wake up because of this overpowering need to wee. My head feels heavy and stuck to the pillow like it's weighed down with rocks. I couldn't lift it with a crowbar if my life depended on it. And I can't lift my arms or legs either. I hold on for as long as I can and then let go. You wouldn't think you could get embarrassed when you're by yourself and have so many other things on your mind anyway, but you can all right. Warm piss soaks into my clothes and the mattress. It goes cold before I wake up again. I go in and out of consciousness thinking about Pommy being the puppet master again. When I was really little, even before I started school, I used to hate going to bed because I knew I'd dream about her being in the ceiling and holding strings that

made me do what she wanted. It seemed like I had that dream every single night. I can't remember when they stopped, but now here she is again making me have sex with John. While we're having sex his sweet face turns into a circus clown with small sharp teeth and blind eyes.

Then I wake up and realise I might not die. I go from being so pissed off about that, to wanting to live; but I'm drowning in seaweed and can't move a muscle to save myself.

Time could be anywhere. I don't know how many days I've been here. All I know is that it's daylight and I'm awake and not dead. I feel very tired about still being alive. It seems so much trouble to die and surely it doesn't have to be that hard. I stumble into my clothes and sneak out of the hotel so I don't have to face the hotel manager.

My legs barely move but I put one foot in front of the other in the direction of home. I try to hail a taxi but they slow down, take one look at me, and drive off. It must be very early because there's hardly any cars on the roads. I don't know what day it is. I don't believe I'll make it home but stopping in the street seems so much worse than walking and my feet move on their own on the soupy footpath.

After what seems like days I turn into the cobbled lane near my house and you won't believe it, I see John coming towards me. He stops and watches me stumble on for a few minutes and then slowly walks towards me again. I fall into his arms and cry.

'Why?' It's the only thing he keeps saying. Over and over. His face looks terrible but, more than anything, he looks disappointed.

Words don't come and I shake my head while he undresses me and puts me to bed because I don't know what to tell him. I can see he's mad but he manages to stroke my hair in a tender way that makes me feel ashamed. I hear him on the telephone calling the police to say he's found me. I fall asleep again and when I wake up I'm alone.

My arms and legs and the skin on them feel delicate. Special, you might say. The weight in my arms is new, like I've never felt their weight before and it seems so amazing that I can't believe anyone else could have experienced this light weight of their arms ever. My arms, the fact that I can feel their weight, makes me glad I'm still alive. I feel very tired but at peace. Peace. It's the first time I feel peace. I'm lying at the bottom of a swimming pool and able to breathe at the same time.

There are explanations with Alan and Ros and, of course, John. I pretend to be my old self but I can't settle into being entirely alive again. For weeks I live under water. John says he'll never understand why I did it so we shouldn't talk about it again. We almost have enough money for Melbourne and he says we should go sooner than we'd planned and start afresh.

That's when I have the blow up with Pommy. A few days before we're ready to leave, I go home to Graceville to say goodbye and to borrow a suitcase. I know Neville has one and they aren't going anywhere with the baby due any time. Neville isn't home and Pommy won't lend me the case without asking him first. I'm so mad. Like, it was like, his feelings about lending me the case were more important than me actually having a suitcase to go on this big trip. It isn't as though I'm going to take something from him, as though I'm going to keep it.

To tell the real truth, I'm jealous of Neville because Pommy's so loyal to him when everyone knows he's nothing but a big fat liar. He'll lie about anything even if there's no good reason and there's nothing in it for him. He'll just do it for fun.

'Can't you see what a fuckwit he is?' I say. That's the wrong thing to say with her about to have his baby, but I'm mad. Pommy can't see anything since he'd come along.

'Get out. Just go. Get out.' She can say things in a very cold way sometimes.

'I'm not going without the case.' I've got this idea that I'm not going to let that fat liar Neville win this one. Leaving without that case is just something I've decided I'm not doing.

'You are, if I have to make you. Now get out!'

She starts dragging me towards the door. I hold my feet against the door-frame and fight her with strength I don't know I've got. We tear each other's hair and swear and fall onto the bed all over each other. This really pregnant person and me hating each other when before we'd loved each other more than anything else in the world.

When we were in primary school I used to brush Pommy's hair in the softest way I could so she'd know I loved her without me having to say it because you didn't say things like that in our family. While I was doing it, I'd think of her doing the same thing to me. But she never did. She was always too busy fighting with Gran or Mum, who were always shouting back at her. Once when she shouted at Mum 'You're not a bloody mother anyway, you've never been one and you never will be. You're just a provider.' And she screamed that last word so loud. That's when I hugged her and she hugged me and we cried all over each other because we both knew she'd said how we all felt, but because she'd said it out loud a black cloud hung over the house.

Now everything's different. Now we hate each other and want to tear each other to pieces.

Betty hears the noise and comes in.

'Now, now girls. This is terribly unseemly. Barbara, really, Barbara, I think you should leave dear. Oh dear. Stop. Please, stop before you kill each other. Think of the baby. Girls.'

When she says that we do stop. We're both breathing hard because we've been crying so much while we've been punching each other but now we stare for a second before I grab my handbag and run out.

'I'll never forgive you!' I shout back over my shoulder as I go down the road.

'Good! I hope I never see you again,' she shouts after me.

John finds someone to lend me a suitcase. Alan and Ros come to the station to see us off. Ros has made some hash

cookies for the trip. A few weeks ago I'd picked an autumn leaf and dried it in a book. I'd cut it in half, half for me and half for John. I'd given it to him that morning. John was showing Ros.

'Two halves make a whole,' he's telling her.

'That's so romantic.'

I feel like a true hippie because that's what hippies are supposed to do. They're supposed to love each other and do romantic things with nature. But I know the real reason I'd given him the leaf was so he wouldn't feel so bad after what I'd done to him.

We kiss Alan and Ros goodbye with tears in our eyes, promising to write and never forget them. We wave as the train pulls out of the station. Me and John hold hands and don't talk for a few minutes.

'We've only got enough money to last about a month. If we don't get jobs, Barbie, we're fucked,' John says at last.

'Don't worry, I'll get the reference from the Chief and that'll get me a job. You just wait and see.'

I'm lying here not sleeping and I hear someone come into the room. I feel this hand touch my feet and of course I know it's the Chief but I don't know what to do, so I pretend to be asleep. He's touching me so gentle you've got no idea. He's stroking my leg. It's so soft, like no-one else has ever touched me like that before. Straight away I'm wide awake but I don't know what to say. Although I'm pretending to be asleep I'm actually more awake than I've ever been in my entire life. His hand runs up and down my whole body then slips under the covers. I'm not wearing any nightie or pyjamas. I just wear undies and a T-shirt to bed. He does exactly the same thing he'd just done but this time on my bare skin. From my toes, slowly up the inside of my leg, over my undies, stopping just for a second between my legs. Then, so gently, really, you just couldn't imagine, he touches my tummy and then, God, he goes to my bosoms. He touches them a bit but he just brushes past my nipples like they almost aren't there. But they are! They're there, all right. Then his hand goes down again to my tummy, both sides of the inside of my legs which, I swear to the Blessed Virgin, almost on their own, just start to open a little bit. I wouldn't have opened them deliberately, because, apart from anything else, I don't want him to know I'm moving because I'm supposed to be asleep.

Then he takes off my undies and I still don't move. But I guess, by now, it's only to save either of us from having to say anything. I mean, what would you say? He parts the hairs between my legs and I can feel the colder air right on my clitoris but he still doesn't touch it yet.

I know about my clitoris. I found it one night a few years ago when I was pouring hot water from our hair-rinsing jug over my legs, which I'd swung up to rest on the wall on one side of our bath. I laid side-on soaking and my legs had got cold. The water trickled between my legs and, I was so amazed, I got this feeling like if I had everything I've ever wanted it wouldn't feel as good as that. Pommy'd found out what it was called. She'd found hers too. She was the only one I'd told and I think I was the only one she'd told.

Anyway, then the Chief puts his fingers inside my vagina. Pommy'd found that word for me too. She's a wealth of information, Pommy. I'm slippery inside and then I feel his fingers go up to my clitoris again. He takes it so gently — you wouldn't believe how gentle he is — between his thumb and finger and then he massages the skin just underneath that old clitoris of mine. It's like torture but it isn't. I keep hoping his hand will slip so he touches the very tip. He doesn't touch it at all actually, but, just when I think I'm going to die, I come. I'm no poet and I hate all that romantic stuff, but my heart really does feel like it's opened up like a flower. No kidding. It's so amazing I'm shaking and I keep sighing like I'm incredibly tired, but I'm not tired at all.

The Chief doesn't say anything. He kisses me on the cheek and goes back to bed.

To be honest, I just lie there in shock. I think back to Rick, the guy who raped me on my fourteenth birthday. And about Col. And about how they'd both kept saying 'bottoms up, bottoms up' every time I finished a drink. I know it sounds like I got myself drunk but if you'd been there you'd know for sure it was them who got me drunk. After that first time with Rick he'd come around to our house and tell me to get my gear off. Even if I had my period. Ugh! Then he'd root me. For Rick, I'd just been a hole to put his dick into. I don't think those Gravatt Boys know anything about clitorises. In fact, I didn't think any guys knew much about them.

After thinking a lot, I fall into a deep sleep. And in the morning, you won't believe it, I wake up and realise pretty damn quick that I'm in love.

HOW TO WALK



In Melbourne, John and I head straight for St Kilda.

'It's where the action is. There's acid and dope all along Fitzroy Street.'

He's been everywhere. As far north as Cairns and even down to Tasmania. He knows everything.

We find a room in a gay guy's boarding house around the corner from Fitzroy Street in Acland Street. The walls are painted red and purple. Big, bright colors. It's a two-storey place. We rent the huge front room that's got a bay window where the sun shines in and makes us toasty warm in the mornings because it can be chilly down south.

'It's like our first real home, with just the two of us.' I feel so happy I could sing but you don't want to sound like a dickhead.

Once we're settled, I have to ring the Chief. I don't want John there when I make the call because he's pretty touchy about him. He knows everything. More or less. So when John rings about forklift driver jobs I make the call from another phone box. I can feel my heart pumping like a train while I'm dialing the number of his office. He told me never to call him again when I left. Maybe he won't even talk to me. It's been about a year but it feels like another life.

When the phone answers it's a secretary who asks me to wait. I can hear my own breathing.

'Barb, how are you dear? How lovely to hear from you.' On the phone he's got a deep, warm voice, friendly but business-like. He doesn't wait for me to answer. 'Now, what can I do for you after all this time?'

'I'm back in Melbourne trying to find work. I thought you could maybe give me a reference.'

'Well, that's nice, Pet. Of course I can. You did a wonderful job with the girls. I'd be more than happy to. Did you come down by yourself or are you with someone.'

It's like he's talking in code. I know he's paranoid about being taped because he'd given me a tape recorder for my fifteenth birthday and I'd tried to secretly tape him telling stories to the girls so I could play it to them when he wasn't there. When he'd found out he'd yelled at me and said if he ever caught me taping him again I'd be out on my ear. I

don't know why he's so paranoid because he'd told me tapes can't be used as evidence in court anyway. Now he's trying to sound to anyone who didn't know about us that he's just a friendly employer helping out with a reference. But he can't fool me about the reason he'd asked if I'm alone.

'No, I'm with my boyfriend.'

'Well, that's lovely, dear. What's his name?'

'John. He's here with me now.'

'Lovely. Well, why don't you come over on Saturday morning. I'll have something typed and you can pick it up from the house. Save you a trip into town.'

We make a time and say goodbye and I think who are you kidding because it's much easier for me to go into town than out to Kew from St Kilda.

The two days waiting seem like a long time. John says he'll come to the house with me and wait outside.

'If anything happens, just scream. I'll look after you, Barbie.'

'I'll be okay.' I don't feel the slightest bit okay.

'Are you sure you want to go? You don't have to if you don't want to,' he says. I like the way he's trying to protect me.

'It's okay. It's just a bit of paper.'

I'm not sure how I'm going to feel when I see the Chief. I'm not sure I even want to know.

John gives me a peck on the cheek before I go in.

'Remember, if you need me, I'll be right here.'

I walk down the long garden path and everything looks so familiar. Everything's the same and yet completely different. I knock at the door.

The Chief answers wearing this white terry toweling dressing gown that's too short and makes his legs look skinny and whiter than ever.

'There you are. Come in Pet. Come in.' He's still doing the uncle thing, smiling that creepy smile.

'Are the girls here?' I can hardly get the words out, I'm that nervous.

'No, they're at their Nana's. They'd loved to have seen you though.' He's walking towards the kitchen and talking too loud.

As soon as we're both in there, he walks to the far end near the stove. Then he turns around and bends his legs in a kind of squat and pushes his hips forward towards me. At the same time he opens the dressing gown and starts wanking and whispering.

'Oooo, you look so good. Ooh, I've missed you. And I bet you've missed this too, haven't you, Pet?' He's got the watery-eyed smile.

He looks so gross. When people do things, you'd think they'd stop to think about how they look. If people stopped to think about how they looked they wouldn't do half the things they do. I surprise myself how shocked I am. I shouldn't be, but I am, even though it's no different to how he was before but I see him in a different way now. I don't know what to do. I think, how dare you do that. Don't you know I've got a boyfriend? But he just stands there wanking with that smile and I feel sick.

'Why are you whispering?' I want to change the mood. I

don't know how but that's the best I can do.

'Anna's up in the bedroom. She's the new babysitter.' He's smiling, showing his short white teeth and his blue eyes are shining like mad. Now I'm embarrassed for him that he doesn't know what a dirty old man he looks.

'How old is she?'

I don't want to admit it because it's so stupid, but I feel jealous. How you can be disgusted about someone and then jealous that they're with someone else at the same time is something I'll never understand, but that's life I guess.

'Twenty-five, but she's not as gorgeous as you were. Are.'

'When did she come? How long has she been here?'

'A month or so after you left. She's Russian. Her English isn't that good.'

He keeps his distance but he's still standing there playing with his dick. He's slowly wanking and smiling while we're talking like he's scratching his arm or something.

'Do you want to give it a bit of a suck, Pet? I know you must have missed it.'

'John's waiting outside. I better just get the reference. I

said I wouldn't be long.'

Am I glad John's there. It looks like the Chief's finally worked out I won't be in anything and he stops wanking and closes his dressing gown.

'All right, Pet. That's fine. I've got it here. Anything else I can do for you just let me know. Now come and meet Anna

while I get your reference. It's up in the bedroom.'

We walk up the stairs together. Can you believe I'm nervous about meeting her?

'Anna, this is young Barb. I told you about her.'

Anna looks sophisticated. She's got a big, wide mouth and green eyes like a cat. She's got this body, not fat but round like you might see in old paintings. I'm jealous all right.

'Anna's done a wonderful job with the house and she's teaching the girls to read while she teaches herself, aren't you Pet?'

So she's Pet, too. She smiles and says hello pleased to meet you with a funny accent.

'John's waiting, I really should go.'

We're polite when we say goodbye while we're going down the stairs and that suits me.

'Now, you're all right for money are you, dear?' He's talking too loud again.

At the front door he starts whispering again.

'You come back and visit on your own one day. Okay, Pet? Don't forget, now. Just give me a call at work.'

I mumble something and shuffle out the door. I'm ashamed my heart is beating so loud it almost hurts.

Outside, John puts his arms around me and asks how it went. I wave the bit of paper and smile but I don't say anything about what happened inside. What would I say? I'm ashamed of feeling jealous, about what he'd done in the kitchen, about not calling for help. I feel terrible.

It doesn't do any good anyway. Even with the reference I can't get a job. I learned to type in the convent but I'm not very fast and don't have any experience, either. John can't even get a job and we're running out of money so we move to a cheaper place in Barkly Street.

After a couple more weeks John and me are talking about heading north again because things have to be better there. It can't be worse.

Mum had moved to Sydney while we'd been away and everyone at home has jobs at last. I ring to ask if we can stay with her until we find a place.

'Why don't you come back home to live, Barb? You could go back to school.'

I think Mum says things like that because she thinks that's what mums are s'posed to say. It's like she doesn't care that much whether I do or don't but she gives it a shot and if it doesn't work, oh well, at least she tried.

'It's too late.'

'It's not too late. It's never too late. Just think about it.' We hitch up to Sydney. On the way it's so beautiful looking at the paddocks and trees I get this feeling I want to buy a piece of land and grow things, make a garden. It's such a strong feeling when I see some house sitting up on a hill with the sun shining on it my whole body's taken away and I'm already living there. I say to John, I want to live in the country and own some land. He holds my hand and says he does too. Where that idea comes from I don't know. We'd moved so much we never had a garden. Once we tried to have one. Mum gave all us kids a little plot and we were supposed to plant things in it but that lasted about a day. I don't know about growing anything but that doesn't stop you from getting a feeling so strong it makes you ache sometimes.

We get to Strathfield where Mum's living. We sleep on a couch in the lounge while John's looking for work. Pommy and Neville have moved into a flat a train stop away with the new baby, who they've called Christian. Bloss, Betty and Nicole, Jenny and the baby are all living with Mum. My little brother Peter's gone off to the same boarding school in Melbourne as Mick because he's twelve now. Mick's already been there two years even though Mum can't pay the fees. I don't know how she manages to get them to take Peter because they're always after her about the money for Mick.

I still don't feel great. I write to Gran and tell her because I can't tell anyone up here. She writes back.

Dearest Barb,

Sorry you are so depressed.

Ask Jen and Bloss are they too tired to post the letters your mother told me at 12 o'clock Sunday that they had written.

She also told me you were back home. Barb, please go back to school.

I believe Jen and Michael are having an engagement party on Sunday which Michael is paying for. Your mother or father should pay for that. Has Warren been baptized yet? If not they should do that on the same day. I got Warren's birthday card back yesterday and it had been sent all around the world. It had been to three places in the ACT, in other words Canberra. I had written two letters to Jen, 12th and 14th Feb, and one to Bloss, 15th

Feb, stamped and addressed envelope enclosed.

The water shortage here is that bad people with even number houses are only allowed to water their gardens with a hose from 7-9pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday and odd numbers Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. No one on Sunday but they can use buckets.

How is John anyway? Write straight back and let me know what cooks.

Love Gran

The letter doesn't help much. I wonder why she's so worried about water restrictions when she doesn't even have a garden. I write and tell her I've already decided to go back to school because it's the beginning of the year and I might as well give it another go. I've got nothing else to do.

I tried writing out *Desiderata* on nice paper in old English writing and selling them in the street but no one bought even one. I like that poem: 'Go placidly amid the noise and haste. Remember what peace there may be in silence.'

The day I try to sell them outside the shops, it's a Saturday morning, I'm walking there and can't think how I'm supposed to walk. I try different ways. Like, slow and sexy or fast and business-like, then in a rhythm. I think there must be a walk that's just right for me but I can't work out why it doesn't happen naturally. I wonder if other people spend half their time trying to work out how to walk. And if they do, then what about the other time they must spend working out all the other stuff. Like how to eat and what to say and what clothes to wear. The whole thing makes me tired and depressed as hell.

John gets a job as a forklift driver and finds a bedsit a couple of train stations away from where I'm living at Mum's house so he can be closer to his work. I stay at Mum's so I

can walk to Strathfield High School.

The year starts like any other old year at school, but I feel different to the other girls. The only way I can explain it, is that they're like kids and I feel old like I've been married for a hundred years.

How many boys have you kissed? Did he put his tongue in your mouth? Has he called you since Saturday?

Some of the girls in my class haven't even had their first kiss. I last a week. Mum tries to talk me into staying: You'll settle in, just give it until the end of term; go on, it won't hurt. That's about as complicated as her arguments get but she does ring the school and a counsellor tells her there's TAFE colleges for people going back to school after dropping out. They're usually for adults but they take people my age, too. There's one a couple of train stops away from Strathfield that starts a month later than schools, so I reckon I don't have much to lose.

John likes the idea of me going to TAFE instead of school. He says it doesn't make me seem so young. I don't know what he's worried about because I'm sixteen now. He finds someone to buy acid from at his work and we take it on weekends. The last trip we have is our first bad one together. I get clingy and want him to hold me so bad I feel like I'll be sick if he doesn't, and all that with me knowing how much guys hate it when you cling. When I think about how much I want his arms around me I feel like puking. Anyway, he won't and I don't blame him because I'm so pathetic.

'Please, just hug me and tell me you love me. I'll be all right if you do that. Please.'

But he turns his back to me and tells me to go home. I sob on his bed and he looks at me like you might look at some squashed dog poo, which is about how I feel.

The next weekend John says he's been having bad flashbacks from all the acid. He's been doing acid for years. He says he's going to admit himself to a psychiatric hospital. He's done it before and been there for a couple of months.

I still feel clingy. The thought of not having John around makes me panic. Sex is still a problem but without him there's nothing but home which if you could imagine a snake pit you'd be getting close to knowing how much I don't want to be here. This is when I've just heard Mum talking to Betty about my real father. I thought Arthur Biggs, Mum's ex-husband, was my father. He seems to think I'm his daughter. But then I hear that my real father was one of her customers.

'What kind of customer?' I pipe up from the kitchen.

'You know, when I was on the game.' She can be very matter-of-fact.

'What do you mean, on the game?' I know what that means because you pick these things up when you live in a family like mine but, and call me thick here, I didn't really think she had done it.

'Well, you know what I used to do to get Christmas presents for you kids. They don't grow on trees you know.'

I do and don't know. I don't like to think of Mum having sex. And sex for money isn't something that brings back many happy memories for me. It makes me wish I'd been born into a boring family.

That's when I start calling her Mother Biggs. 'Mum' doesn't sound right any more. To tell the truth, it hasn't sounded right for a while. Anyway, it's a joke at first. Mother Biggs, like Mother Superior. But it soon gets shortened to Mother and then Bloss and Pommy start calling her that straight away too like they've been waiting for something else to call Mum all their lives.

I visit Pommy at her new flat a couple of times but she never really wants to talk much. We play cards a few times with Neville but it's not the same with him there. She's teaching herself more shorthand and typing. She's so smart. But I don't like going there. I don't like Neville because he lies all the time and you find yourself believing him even though you're pretty sure he's lying but you don't know for sure. He's very convincing, Neville.

When John decides to admit himself the thought of being trapped at home with nowhere else to go and no-one else to belong to sends me into a spin that makes me beg him not to go in. But he says the voices are making him scared.

I start at the Tech and meet this lady called Carol Devlin. She's 32 and used to be a model. She has two girls not much younger than me, eleven and thirteen. Their dad used to be a famous rock star in New Zealand. His name's Johnny Devlin but, being me, I've never even heard of him. When they were married, Carol says everyone, even the newspapers, thought they were the perfect couple, the rock star and the model who went to England where she was on the cover of *Vogue* magazine and even went to a couple of parties with the Beatles who weren't totally famous then. She's down to earth and hates would-be-if-you-could-bes but then she brings pictures of herself in the magazines to show me all the same, like she's proud of what she's done. I would be too. But she reckons people in modeling stink. She's got all kinds of views. She says aboriginal art's going to be a big thing in the world in a few years and she's got some. She buys land and has a house and a flat. She says real estate's the only way to make money. She collects wild

flowers and tells me about this old lady, Bea Smith, who she's always reading about in the newspaper. Bea's from a rich family but recites anything you like from Shakespeare for twenty cents. She does it on the city streets. She also jumps into people's cars at traffic lights for a lift because there are too many cars in the world. Sometimes they drive her to a police station instead. Carol's doing her leaving certificate so she can do matric next year.

The week after John admits himself to the psych hospital, I lose it. I'm trying to work out how to do maths and science at college but I've missed so much I can't follow anything. I'm doing Year Ten. But I left school when I was fourteen to go to the convent half way through Year Eight. Working in the laundry washing sheets didn't exactly train me for study and now I have to do algebra and chemistry which sounds like double Dutch to me.

The day after John goes in I have a fight with Bloss at home when she takes my chair from the table after I leave to go to the toilet. When I come back I throw her off and scratch her face even though she probably didn't even know I was sitting there when she took the chair. I'm a bitch but I can't help it.

I need John so bad I'm going to burst. I have to be with him or I'll die.

Everything builds up until one day I go to the same hospital John's in and try to admit myself.

'What would you like to see a doctor about,' asks a nurse on the desk. She's got an ugly mole with a hair growing out of it just above her lip that you can't stop staring at no matter how much you try.

'I want to be admitted,' I say, trying not to stare.

'You can't just be admitted. What's wrong with you?'

'I'm having flashbacks.'

'What kind of flashbacks?'

'You know. Acid. LSD.'

'Well, you'll have to fill out this form and wait to see a doctor.'

I fill out the form with my name and address and date of birth and give it back to her. Then I wait. It's 10am. I'm in a circular waiting room with the desk in the middle. People come and go but I might as well not be there. They ignore me all day. By 2pm I still haven't seen anyone. When I ask how long it's going to be they say they've got emergencies and I just have to wait.

While I'm sitting here I start thinking. I get bored very easily. I don't like to have nothing to do because it turns my brain into a washing machine. All the jobs I've had and all the men I've had sex with. The guy with the fancy car outside Willies, the two guys in the red sports car in Melbourne, the Chief and the rest. What worries me more than those guys are the ones I can't even remember. I try to think of them all, to count them. Just when I think I'm getting somewhere I lose count. I think I've got one and then he slips away and I'm not sure if he's that one or another one altogether. It starts to drive me crazy. Their faces are so mixed up all I can see is some stubble on a face or bad teeth or a ring someone's wearing. I even start to smell wet grass under me or beer on some guy's breath. They run through my head like a parade that goes on for hours but I can't get the number right. It seems very important to know the number. The more I think, the more I lose them and have to start counting again. And the more confused I get the more I know I don't want to go back out there. The idea of living in a cozy hospital with clean white sheets and people running around knowing exactly what they're supposed to be doing seems like a good idea. I get so I want it so bad, I decide right there I'm not going back out there no matter what. They'll have to drag me out before I'll leave.

After I've been there for about a million hours, still no-one's taking any notice of me. They keep getting emergencies. The pressure in my head builds up until I can feel my cheeks and then my neck getting so hot I feel like I could explode. That's when I decide I'll be their next emergency. After I decide, it takes another couple of hours to work up to it because making a fuss isn't my strong point. I give myself a deadline of 5pm so I won't lose my nerve. On the dot, I pick up one of the bright orange plastic chairs and throw it against a wall. The nurses at the desk look up. They're finally interested. I pick up another chair and throw that at another wall. It's amazing how easy it is once you get started. I scream and tell everybody to get fucked while I'm throwing things around. When the nurse comes I've worked up to it so well I can't stop and they have to get two men in white coats to sit on me to stop me throwing things. Boy, am I strong. I surprise myself.

'Tranquillize her and see if Dr Hellier can come straight away. Just my luck when I'm about to go home,' says the nurse with the mole.

I wish I'd thrown a few chairs around hours ago.

I see a doctor but not for long. He admits me but because of where I live he puts me in a different hospital to John's. It's called Rydalmere.

'Why?'

'Strathfield's part of the Rydalmere catchment area.'

I don't want to go. I've fucked everything up. But after such a crazy performance like that I can hardly say I just want to be with my boyfriend. It's funny though, because even though in one way my spirits sink when I find this out, when they're driving me off in an ambulance, another part of me doesn't even care.

At the other hospital I have to wait to see a different psychiatrist. Her name's Dr Hammersmith. She's a pudgy-looking lady with beady eyes that reach out to you when you get to telling her some sex bits.

'We hear you gave quite a performance earlier tonight. Now what was that all about?' As if I'm a naughty kid. And like she and the whole hospital heard the story, not just her.

'I feel terrible and want to be admitted.'

I end up telling her my whole life story, practically. It all blurts out. Everything since I'd run away from the convent in Brisbane and went to Gran's in Melbourne and then the Chief's house. I didn't tell her anything before then because

nothing before that seemed important after the Chief. But after a while the sympathy looks like it's painted on. Like that's her patient face. I don't know what a psychiatrist's supposed to look like, but she looks to me like someone's mum, not some very wise psychiatrist who knows everything. Even though I cry a lot she thinks I'm one of those kids who lie all the time. Like that Shirley Temple movie where she pretends she's a rich kid when really she's a poor kid with no parents at all. You should see the bored kind of yeah-pull-the-other-one kind of look she gets when I tell her about the Chief being one of Mother's customers.

'And you say you're only sixteen and all this happened in the last two years?'

'All? Yeah. I s'pose it is.'

'What do you mean you suppose? It is or it isn't.'

'It must be. I ran away when I was fourteen.'

'Well, I think that's enough for one night. Now, we'll see you again tomorrow and talk some more. The nurse will show you to your room.' That's what she says right after she's decided she doesn't believe me. The main thing though, is that she's admitting me. I'm in! I don't expect to be seeing John any time soon but it's funny, during the couple of hours I'd been talking, I'd barely mentioned him. I feel incredibly tired. And hot.

They put me in a white cotton nightie in a room by myself. The nurse, a tall, big girl with no neck and the kind of eyes I wish Mother had, asks me a bunch of questions for a form then settles me in and takes my temperature. She comes back with a bowl of cold water and a face washer. She sponges down my whole body and she's so soft and gentle. No-one's ever touched me like that before unless sex was on their mind. Even then, soft and gentle doesn't pop up in your porridge every day.

'How long have you had this fever?'

'I didn't know I had one.'

She gives me a sleeping pill and some aspirin. That's the last I remember.

I'VE ONLY BEEN HERE A WEEK and they've got me folding sheets already. They're hospital sheets that we wash in our mangle room. It's called a mangle room because of the huge machine in it that's called a mangle. It dries the sheets on a huge roller and irons them at the same time.

I know I don't have to be in a bloody convent folding sheets. I had a choice. I could have said I'd never see Col again but I knew I couldn't stop myself anyway, so what was the point? It was like an honour or loyalty or love thing. Something like that. Maybe I just wanted to get away from home. I don't see any future there. I got a job in a milkbar after school so I could earn some money and save some to maybe get away some day but it seemed just too slow.

On the weekends the rough people Jenny and me were hanging around with scared me. Jenny's been raped like me and now they just come whenever they want it. The only reason that didn't happen with me after the first few times was because of Col. When you have a guy, the others think. He'll punch me out if I go near his chick. It scares me that I'll become like Jenny and the others. Like the girls who've left school and have two babies and live with their mums and talk with rough accents. Boys come and root them right in their mother's houses. And the boys talk and laugh with the mums like it's okay that they treat their daughters that way. And I know those guys don't love the girls because I hear the way they talk about them when they're not there.

Mum had said all I had to do was agree never to see Col again and I wouldn't have to go into the convent. But if I'm really honest, I said no to get away more than because I loved Col. I know the reason Mum's put Pommy and me in convents is because she thinks it's what good mothers are supposed to do. She wants to be a good mum but she really doesn't have much of a clue. She knows whatever she's doing as a mother isn't working very well so she's trying another tack. She rang the nuns in Melbourne and asked them what to do and they said they had a place for Pommy. Now they've got one for me, too, up here. The Good Shepherd convents are for girls who'd normally be put in jail. They've been charged with being in moral danger, which is rooting people you're not supposed to, or stealing maybe. I guess Pommy and me are pretty bad but not as bad as some other girls in here who are heroin addicts or have done robberies.

I don't mind folding sheets all day. I like repetitive work. It keeps my mind off things. And I like the group room where we have a tablecloth and say grace and everything's clean and organized. We play board games after dinner and then have to get into our PJs, clean our teeth and go to bed at 9.30pm. I like having a routine. It's like when Gran lived with us in Melbourne. I even like some of the nuns. The head nun is very intelligent. She's at university studying her masters — whatever that is. I know it's important and hard. Her face looks intelligent. And she's kind too. And funny. I wish I was like her.

The main thing I don't like is the girls. Or really, more to the point, they don't like me. Kids never do. I just can't make friends. It wouldn't be so bad if that was all it was. I can manage without friends. God knows I've done it long enough. You get used to it when you move as much as we have. The big problem is that they really hate me. They tease and talk about me and laugh when I go past.

If I knew what it was they didn't like I could maybe try to be different, but I don't know. I try to change this and that but the more I try the worse it gets.

They tell me when I've been here three months I might be able to have a few hours off in the afternoons to learn typing. That'll be good.

In the meantime I wait for weekends.

That's when you can have visitors. That's when you might get some tuck shop money and be able to buy some chocolate bickies or chips. That's what I'm waiting for.

But I've been here a month and haven't had any visitors yet.

TREES WITH NO LEAVES



I get woken up next morning by a different nurse. They say I'm allowed to stay in bed if I want to because of the fever. But in the afternoon I get bored and put clothes on and go downstairs.

That's when I first meet some of the other patients. They want to know why I'm there. I can tell they're bored too, sitting around talking to each other and smoking like chimneys, waiting for a new person to come and ask them what they're in for. Lucky for them, I ask a lot of questions.

Harold's a motor bike mechanic who says he's been impotent for fifteen years since some priest had sex with him when he was an altar boy. Since then he'd got married and had sex with his wife a couple of times but after that he couldn't, no matter how much she cried. Carla's a mum with three little kids and I think she's still so beautiful it doesn't matter she's stacked on a ton of weight because she's depressed. She told me how one night she'd cried so much her husband had to step over her lying on the bedroom floor like she was a worm. I know how she felt about that because of that time with John when we were tripping. We say we're better off without guys because aren't they selfish and bastards and who needs them anyway? Carla tells me that Gladys, who's sitting on the bench opposite us, is 62 and has been sitting around staring into space ever since she got there nine months ago. They make her get up to stare instead of lying in bed, which seems mean to me. I know where I'd rather be if all I wanted to do was stare all day.

The hospital's split up into wards. There are wards for really crazy people and others like this one where people aren't locked up. They're called free wards. We're the not-so- crazy ones. There's a dorm for girls and a men's one upstairs. There's another ward on top that's empty.

We have to line up for meals with our trays. Breakfast's watery scrambled eggs and toast or cereal. Lunch is shepherd's pie with boiled peas and carrots. It's plain but hot and yummy and the best food I've seen in a while because food's hit and miss at home.

It isn't long before I get to know how long a day can be, which is pretty bloody long.

Outside's huge. They've got a football field and a lot of other wards. We're allowed to wander around any time we like, but there isn't much to do except play pool in the recreation room. I play all day sometimes. I'm like that. I can get pretty obsessed with things. After a few months I can beat anyone who comes in. There's a creek behind the hospital, too, but I don't want to explore much because sitting on the benches with the others is cozy and who'd want to be by themselves when you can gab all day with other people who feel as bad as you, or worse? We talk about who's having shock treatment and who's seeing what doctor and what are you doing on the weekend and does your husband want you home yet? Everybody workshops each other's problems. Everyone's an amateur psychiatrist: You're holding back ... how can you expect to get better if you can't open up ... I think unconsciously you're projecting feelings about your father onto your husband ... it sounds to me like you've got unrecovered memories, if you'd just face up to them you'd be out of here in no time.

After I've been here a few days, Mother turns up to see me. They must have phoned her. She comes waddling across the courtyard looking really pissed off.

'What the bloody hell are you doing in here? You don't belong in a place like this. There's nothing wrong with you. You're not sick. Come home.'

I can't say anything. I don't even want to try to explain because this huge repulsion comes right over me. It's huge. I run off in the other direction with her shouting after me.

'Don't bloody talk to me, then. I only came to bring you some undies. Ungrateful bitch.' I turn around and see she's got tears in her eyes. She throws a brown paper bag on the ground. I feel terrible that I've made her cry. Mother hardly ever cries. But there's no way I can talk to her, even though I've got no idea why. She hasn't done anything wrong.

Not long after that I'm called to see Dr Hammersmith again.

'I have to admit we weren't sure if what you'd told me was true.'

What's this 'we' business?

'And now what do we think?' I say, copying her, but she ignores that.

'Your mother confirmed your story.'

My story. My story. Why would anyone make up stuff like that?

'Why would I say it if it wasn't true?'

'Sometimes people do.'

She sits there staring at me. I stare at the floor watching bits of dust floating down through the sunlight coming in through the long window behind her. It looks pretty. We spend the rest of the time like that.

I have two sessions a week with Dr Hammersmith. We don't say much. I figure it's some kind of technique to sit there and wait for me to talk. But I don't really have anything to say. It turns into a game of who can sit for the longest time without talking. I'm pretty good at it and so's she.

After about a week Carol comes to visit. Somebody's rung the school and told them where I am. She doesn't ask anything about why I'm here. She's great like that. Like, how does she know I don't feel like going into it? How can you explain to someone that you want to be in a nuthouse for no good reason? She just talks about school and the other people in the class.

'Maybe you could keep coming to classes while you're here. Or I could bring in the work and you could do it from here.'

'I don't know. They probably won't let me.'

'I'll ask. I don't trust psychiatrists. The sooner you're out of here the better. But you have to get better first.' Then she leans her beautiful freckled face towards me. She's got a tiny nose like Peter Pan and long mousy hair that brushes against my arm. 'And don't let them give you drugs. They'll turn you into a zombie.'

A couple of weeks later I start back at the college. The other kids in class think I'm crazy. Why else would you be in a nuthouse unless you were crazy, right? They're quite nice to me at first because they're dying to know what goes on. What's it like living in a funny farm? Are there serial killers there? Do people dribble all over themselves? How come you're there and when will you get out? But after that it's like they're scared of me, like I might pull out a knife any second and start chopping them to pieces for Christ's sake.

Carol starts taking me home to her house at lunchtime and we study together on weekends. She's the first grown up who wants to be with me apart from the Chief, so I think it's great when she talks to me about philosophy and money and the government and even trees. She loves trees and knows all their names. Everywhere we drive around she says, look at that Ghost Gum or that Jacaranda or that Paper Bark, isn't it beautiful? It's because of her I find out that some trees drop their leaves off in autumn and grow them back in spring because before that I thought there were trees that had leaves and other trees that didn't. When you move all the time the last thing you're thinking about is trees because you're so busy working out who all the new kids are and what you're supposed to know. You've got a lot to think about when you get to a new place, like how you're going to get out of everyone thinking you're a freak because you don't know stuff they know and you don't have a dad and sometimes you don't have any undies on when the school doctor comes to visit. Stuff like that takes up a lot of time. It wears you out so you don't even start thinking about trees. You see them when you first get to a new place and think, this street has got the trees that haven't got any leaves or the street we're in now's got the trees with leaves. I feel a bit silly now that I know, but then if you think about it, I'm kind of like a tree with no leaves myself. Ha. I'm a bit of a freak all right.

Anyhow, I learn about all kinds of stuff from Carol and all I think about is when I can be with her again. I don't know if I'm in love with her or I just wish she was my mother but all I do know for sure is that I love her so much it hurts sometimes.

I'M UNDER THE COVERS READING with a torch because if Gran finds out I'll cop it. I hate it when Gran turns the light off just when you get near the end and George, she's the most like me, is about to rescue the others before they sit down in the farm house and have ham sandwiches, lashings of ginger beer and clotted cream. The Famous Five are always eating this great food.

I read all the books Pommy does. She loves Hans Christian Andersen stories, *Grimms Fairy Tales*, *Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island*, *Oliver Twist*, everything. I think I read even more than her because I do it at school too.

I started this book in the school library today and I'm almost finished already. I didn't go straight to the library today but went out in the playground instead because one of the kids in my class, Mona, said she had some cake in her lunchbox she didn't want and that I could have it. I've just got stale Vegemite sandwiches so who wouldn't love a soft piece of nice cake. She told me where to meet her. When I go there's about five other girls around her. One is this girl giant they call Yeti. She wants the cake too but I've sat myself closest to Mona. Yeti pinches me really hard and I say Ow! She says That didn't even hurt and I say It did so, it hurt a lot.

Then she says no it didn't, this is what hurts and she stands and jumps up in the air and lifts her foot as high as she can and slams the weight of her whole fat body down on my foot. All the other girls think it's so funny they fall around laughing and I try so hard to laugh too, I almost faint with pain.

That's when I go and hide in the library where there's worlds and worlds of books and I wonder why I ever go to the playground.

Who needs other people's cake when you can curl up with George and Julian and drink ginger beer and eat clotted cream until it's coming out your ears? I wonder what clotted cream tastes like anyway.

John had given me a recorder and some sheet music for my sixteenth birthday. Someone, maybe Mother, brings a bag of clothes for me and the recorder's in it. I start teaching myself how to play some songs. I can spend hours at it. Hours. Even though I'm not very good because I'm teaching myself, it feels like I'm flying and I love to hear myself play. When I learn a new song I play it over and over and drive people crazy. Then one day Dr Hammersmith comes out of her office and says she didn't know I could play the recorder and I look her straight in the eye, which isn't something I do very much, not very much at all. I'm putting how I feel into my songs and secretly I hope someone will hear that and know exactly how I feel because if you asked me I wouldn't even be able to tell you using words.

'I can't play really. I'm learning. It's just practice.'

'It's very good. Very expressive. You should keep it up.' She looks me straight back in my eye. I think then that maybe she does know how I feel when I play, but I'm not sure.

The next time I see her for a session, the feeling between us is different.

Hale-bloody-lujiah, she asks me a question.

'Can you tell us where you grew up?'

Still that old we and us stuff, but at least she's talking.

'Melbourne.'

'Where in Melbourne?'

'We moved every year. We lived all over.'

'What was it like for you?'

'It was usually in the middle of the year, so just when I made friends we'd be off again. I'm not very good at making friends.'

'It sounds like it wasn't a very happy experience for you. Why did you move so often?' She puts her head on the side and gives you this look like a dog wanting a bone or something. It makes you think she wants to know and might really listen if you start to talk.

'Mother couldn't pay the rent or she owed money. There was always something.'

She waves her hand round like the Queen when she's riding in her cars. Like she wants me to go on. For some reason, I feel like it today.

'I remember in one house I came home from school and found all our furniture on the street. I can't remember when I put two and two together, but I got to know we were going to move when Mother ordered up big through the post. She'd order encyclopedias and maths puzzles and books. Stuff like that. Then we'd move and I don't think she paid but I didn't know that until later. These things'd just turn up and we thought, oh, good. We had a lot of educational toys. Mother said they were good for us.'

'So you can talk when you want to.' She's smiling.

'Well, you never asked anything after that first time.' We both laugh, just a bit. She stops that pretty damn quick, though.

'Now, maybe you can fill us in on a few things.'

'Like what?'

'You said you've got five brothers and sisters and that they all have different fathers. Why is that? Do you know?'

'I don't know all the fathers. I don't know any except Peter's. He's my youngest brother. His dad's Lionel but we haven't seen him for a long time. Oh, and then there's Arthur. He's the one I thought was my dad. I called him dad until just about a few months ago. That's when I found out that he's really only the dad of my two oldest sisters. Their names are Jenny and Pommy, that's what we call my sister Linda.'

'What about the other children? What about your father?'

'I don't know him. I thought Arthur was my dad but he isn't. Mine was a John of my mother's. That's a man who pays her for sex, in case you don't know. Mother liked to get us lots of presents at Christmas time and that's how she paid for them. We always had the best Christmases.'

'Is that right? And were the other fathers customers, too?'

'I don't know. All I know about is Arthur. He really thought we were all his kids except Peter. He thought that because when he and Mother got divorced, that's before I remember, he came every Christmas and bought us presents. They slept together because Mother told him every time he came home and there was a new baby, that it was his. She says he's not very bright.'

'And is he?'

'Maybe not. But he was smart with card tricks. He used to teach them to us when he came home. He was in the army. That's where he learnt all the tricks. But we haven't seen him for ages. Since he slept with Jenny years ago we haven't seen much of him.'

I don't know much about Arthur and Jenny. It's just something we all know about but no-one talks about. We don't talk about stuff like that in our family.

'How do you know that? Does your mother know?' She gets that look in her eye again. The one she had the first night when I talked about the juicy bits.

'Yeah, of course she knows. She was the one who told him he wasn't allowed to come any more. Jenny was about eight, I think. I don't remember?'

'Did he have sex with anyone else in the family?'

'With Mother of course. He slept with her when he was home. And he tried to have sex with Pommy and me but we said we had to go to the toilet and we didn't come back. He tried it with Pommy first and she told me what to do before he tried it with me.' I'm really blabbing on. It's like I haven't talked in weeks. It's like I want her to know everything about me in five minutes. I'm impatient like that. Everyone says so.

'Who are you close to in your family? Are you close to Pommy?'

'Mmm. Yeah. She's the only one I think.'

She looks at me now like I'm supposed to keep talking. Suddenly it dries up and I don't want to any more. I see she's got a big notebook in front of her but she doesn't write much in it. I wonder if that means she thinks what I'm saying isn't worth writing down because I'm boring her or she doesn't believe me again.

'What about your mother? Why didn't you talk to her when she came?' She says it like it's some big thing.

'I don't know. I just didn't want to.' What kind of a question is that? I cross my arms and legs and turn away a bit so I won't have to look right at her. You don't always want to look at someone when they keep asking you so many questions.

'You seem angry with her.'

'No. Not really.'

'When you were living at Vernon's house, did your mother try to protect you? Did she know what was happening there?'

'Of course she knew.' Hadn't she worked anything out yet? 'He used to be a John of hers. He'd been hanging around our house for years. She knew what was going on and she said she wanted me to come home, but I didn't want to. She couldn't really make me you know. I was grown up.'

'You were fourteen.'

'She left home when she was fourteen. In our family that's when you're grown up.'

'Do you think some part of you thinks she should have protected you? Should have rescued you from the situation?'

'She asked me to come home and I said no.'

'I'm just trying to work out where your anger comes from in relation to your mother.'

'You're the doctor.' I don't say it but I think, You tell me if you're so smart.

'Well, maybe on some level you blame her for not protecting you.'

I don't say anything. I just stare at her and close my lips tight. She doesn't understand anything about our family. We all live our own lives. It isn't anybody's job to protect anyone else in our family, that's just the way we are. She might as well be from the moon.

'Well, that's probably enough for today. We'll see you on Wednesday then, shall we?' And she sits there all dumpy with doughy eyes, smiling. Like I don't know that she's feeling sorry for me, which always makes me feel like crying.

One day a new man comes to our ward. His name's Max. He's pretty old. About as old as the Chief I'd say. He's also losing some of his hair like the Chief. He's skinny like a string bean. He's in for depression. We talk about our

problems all the time until one night he says he wants to have sex with me. I don't know why I say yes because I don't want to, it's just what I do when men say they want sex with me, like if someone asked you for a glass of water, you wouldn't say no.

'There's nowhere to go.' I hope that'll put him off, but it doesn't.

'I know how to get up to the empty ward.' He tells me. We make a time to meet.

He humps away at me until he comes. I lay there staring at the ceiling wishing I hadn't said yes. Thank God he finishes fast. We're out of there in ten minutes. Afterwards I sit in the stairwell between the floors and feel like crying but nothing happens. I want someone to put their arms round me. Screaming had worked before, so I work myself up into a bit of a scream. It's not that loud and no-one comes. Then I decide to go for it and it's very loud and feels like it's coming from someone else. My favorite nurse is on duty, the one who sponged me down the first night. Her name is Nurse Harding but she's told me to call her Paula.

'What's the matter? What's happened?' She's all panicky.

I can't tell her. Like an idiot I just cry and rock myself like a stupid baby.

'If you don't tell me what's the matter I can't help you.' She doesn't put her arms around me or even come near me. That's why I can't tell her. If she was closer maybe I could but I can't while she's standing there looking a bit pissed off.

'I think we'll give you a sleeping pill and you can sleep in the private room tonight. When are you due to see the doctor again?'

'Tomorrow.'

She gives me some pills and I lay there wondering when they're going to start working. I don't know who I'm mad with but I'm mad. I've got this thing I do when I'm trying to control myself. I feel a bit stupid but it makes me feel better. It sounds awful and weird but the words just popped into my head one day when I was feeling like my brains would cave in if I didn't do something. I can't even remember when it first started. It's a kind of mantra, this thing I say over and over. I only found out what it was called when Pommy told me. She'd read books about meditation and astral travelling. She'd even joined the Rosicrucians just before we were both put into the convents. She'd be into anything that was different. That's how she knew what they were. I hadn't told her mine or anything. She said mantras were supposed to make you feel better. Mine's pretty crazy but it works for me. It's 'hate, hate, hate, hate, hate ...'

Anyway, I say it a few times, not a lot, and it calms me down enough to sleep.

The next morning they take me to see Dr Hammersmith even though I'm not due for a couple of days.

'I hear you were a bit upset last night. Do you want to tell me about it.'

What the hell, why not?

'I had sex with one of the patients.'

She just looks at me as if she expects me to spill my guts but I don't say anything else. I don't want to make it too easy for her. Then she gives in.

'And what was that like?'

What was it like? What is she, some kind of moron or something?

'Awful, of course.'

'What was awful about it? How did it make you feel?'

'It made me feel like killing myself if you really want to know.'

'Why is that?' She's got those bloody currant-looking sympathetic eyes in her doughy face again. I wonder if she just plasters that look on her face when she sees me coming.

'It just did.'

'Is that something you think you could do.'

'What?'

'Kill yourself.'

'Yeah. Why not? It wouldn't be the first time.'

'Is that a solution you've used before when you're not coping?' I wish she wasn't so bloody cool about everything.

'Mmm hmmm. Sometimes.' Where's she going with this? I thought we were supposed to be talking about last night.

'When?' She's like a dog with a bone is old Dr Hammersmith. Once she gets onto something she just doesn't let go.

'When I was in the convent I took an overdose. It wasn't a real one because I only had six pills and of course it didn't work. They took me to the hospital and pumped my stomach. When I got back everyone hated me. The other girls said I just wanted attention.'

'Perhaps you did,' she says.

'You too.' I've had about enough of people telling me that.

'Is it so bad to want attention? To ask for help?'

‘Well, that’s what everyone says.’

‘What made you think of suicide, taking sleeping pills?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you know anyone who’s done that?’

‘No. But Mother tried once in a different way. She came to the convent once and said she was going to kill herself.’

‘Why? How did that make you feel?’

‘Aren’t we supposed to be talking about last night?’ I let out this big sigh.

‘If you want to. But I’m still curious about how you felt when you’re mother said she wanted to kill herself.’

I don’t say anything for a bit. I’m looking at this mat on the floor trying to work out the pattern in it. It’s got squares and round bits that keep repeating. I like numbers and patterns so I try to work out the pattern. Then she asks me again and I know she isn’t going to leave me alone today. It was actually pretty funny how Mother had come to the convent to say goodbye when she was going off to kill herself.

‘She said she was in love with some alcoholic old guy in the government who didn’t love her. She also said my little brother Peter came home crying from his new school and saying kids had teased him about having a fat mum. She said the house was a mess too, and that nobody did anything to help her and that she couldn’t find work. She had a lot of good reasons to want to kill herself. She wouldn’t have said she’d do it otherwise.’

‘And how did you feel about that?’

‘Well, I wasn’t too happy. Every weekend I’d hang around waiting for my name to be called for a visit. I didn’t get a lot. If you had visitors they’d usually bring money for the tuck shop so you could buy bickies or chocolates or toothpaste. That day my name was called and when I saw Mother and her friend Betty I thought straight away something was wrong. Betty didn’t like me and she never came to visit. Mother didn’t come that often either. She told me pretty well straight away that she’d decided to kill herself and not to try to talk her out of it. She told me why and said she didn’t want to do it without saying goodbye. She’d bought a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken for her last meal and gave me a piece. She loves Kentucky Fried. Mother and I ate the chicken while she told me she was going to gas herself in the car. When she came to the bit about Peter she said he’d be better off without her and she started to cry. Betty was crying too, and saying stuff like: “I can’t believe you’re saying this Patricia. I can’t believe you’re just going to leave us all like that. You’re a silly, silly woman. She’s a silly, silly woman, Barbara. Tell her how silly she is.” Betty’s funny the way she talks. She’s a scream. You’d laugh if you heard her.’

Now Dr Hammersmith’s the one not saying anything. I wonder if she would laugh if she heard the way Betty talks. Everyone else does but Dr Hammersmith doesn’t have much of a sense of humor as far as I can work out. It doesn’t seem like old Dr Hammersmith laughs at anything. She just looks at me for a bit. I start checking out the mat again but I can see her out of the corner of my eye, staring at me.

‘Did you try to talk your mother out of trying to kill herself?’

‘Not really. I mean, what was the point? She’d said she didn’t want anyone to talk her out of it. Betty said she’d tried. What was I supposed to do?’

‘What happened then? She didn’t die, obviously.’

‘Well, I guess when they left she went off to finish eating her chicken and gas herself. But someone found her before she died. She was fine except her little toe was missing. No- one ever worked out how that happened. Someone said maybe it was the battery leaking acid or something but Mother said her feet were nowhere near the battery.’

‘How did you feel about that? When your mother left you at the convent thinking you’d never see her again.’

‘Not much. I knew I wouldn’t be getting any tuck shop money for a while.’

Dr Hammersmith just stares at me and nods slowly. She nods for quite a long time. She likes a bit of a nod, old Dr Hammersmith.

Then I decide I’ll tell her more about the Chief, how I first saw him. How it was that very first weekend before I’d met his kids. Before everything changed.

The morning I wake up in love with the Chief, he’s gone and I’m alone. He’s left a note on the table with some money in case I need anything for the house. He said he’s seeing a client, even though it’s Saturday, and I should shop for food for the kids when they come back from their grandma’s house on Monday.

I go to the nearest grocers and buy the Chief’s brand of Kool cigarettes. I buy lamb chops and carrots, potatoes and frozen peas. I’m going to cook up a storm. For the girls I buy Tim Tam biscuits and milk, little packets of chicken noodle soup and some crumpets.

I hang around waiting for the Chief to come home but by afternoon he hasn’t come. I can hardly wait. Pommy once read from a Margaret Fulton cookbook that meat cooked for a long time becomes tender and juicy. She says Margaret Fulton’s never wrong about anything. I put six lamb chops on a tray in the oven when the kids’ cartoons start in the afternoon. I don’t really know that much about oven temperature but I guess by dinner time the chops will be tender and juicy.

The Chief rings me from work to say when he’ll be home and I tell him about dinner. He sounds happy and so am I.

The Chief loves his garden, so I decide to water it while I’m waiting. I pull what I hope are weeds out and water for ages. I keep coming inside to check my chops. They look a bit dried out by about 6pm but I always think everything will turn out all right in the end. That’s why I hardly ever worry. Besides, in this case, I know Margaret Fulton can’t be wrong.

About 7.30, the Chief arrives home. When I hear his key in the front door I run to meet him.

'I hope you're hungry.' I'm smiling and laughing.

'Oh, terrific. What a good girl. What have you made?'

'Well, I just have to put the vegies on, I've got chops in the oven. They're not quite ready yet but by the time the vegies are done I'm sure they will be.' I rush back into the kitchen.

The Chief comes in and looks around. He opens the oven door.

'What's this?' he shouts.

'It's dinner.' I'm not smiling and laughing any more.

'How long have they been cooking?'

'A few hours. They're better when they're cooked for a long time. Margaret Fulton says they get better the longer they're cooked. They'll be all right soon.'

He takes out a plate and lifts the tray out of the oven with a tea towel. The chops look a bit like small brown stones, and they fall onto the plate with a clang.

'Don't you know how to cook? Look at this. You can't eat this ... this ...' He waves his hands in the air and looks from the plate to the oven and back again. I start to feel like the chops look. I never know what to say when someone yells at me. I try to stop myself from crying because you never know if crying will make things better or worse.

'I'm going out to eat,' he says. And he stomps back out the front door.

I eat some crumpets and go to bed. I hear him come home and wait for him to come in to say goodnight but he doesn't. The next day the Chief has forgotten all about the chops. He sits chatting to me the whole day.

'It was great yesterday the way you noticed I'd almost run out of cigarettes and you got some more,' he's saying. 'That's what a top secretary does. She anticipates what her boss wants and just does it without bothering him. It shows intelligence. I think you're pretty smart — even if you can't cook,' he says.

I wonder if I am like a top secretary. He wouldn't say it if it wasn't true. I wonder if a top secretary's a good thing. A secretary doesn't sound that great. Not compared to a barrister. But it must be good because of that word top.

We chat about all kinds of things. He tells me a bit about when he was young. How he'd been in the army and it had made him tough. He was a lieutenant, which is better than a sergeant.

'When I was in there I met the love of my life. I don't think I've loved anyone as much as her.'

I'm rapt. How romantic. This is the first time a grown up has talked to me like I'm worth the time of day. Why's he telling me? He must care what I think. Imagine him caring what I think.

'She lived in Vaucluse in Sydney where I was studying. Her father had made a fortune from an opal mine in Western Australia. He'd scraped the money together from nothing. Then he'd bought a mining lease. He'd bought racehorses that won. Everything he touched turned to gold.'

'When I met Angela she'd just come back from a year living in Switzerland at a finishing school. She was stunning. I met her at a party. I'd been to a private school but none of us were in her league of money. As soon as I laid eyes on her I fell in love. The next day I bought red roses and asked her out. It wasn't long before we started having sex. God she was like an angel. I still remember that first time with her.'

'When her father found out we were seeing each other he told Angela to keep away from me, but I used to climb up a trellis by her bedroom window and sneak in and make love to her while her father was downstairs. I used to have a good old chuckle to myself about the fact that he thought his daughter was being studious in her room and I was banging her right under his roof.' It seems funny that he can say he was banging her when he'd been in love with her but I guess that's just the way guys talk sometimes.

'Anyway, one night I came and she was in tears. She told me she was pregnant. We talked about what we'd do. Even though I was 22, I was really just a kid.'

If he thinks he was a kid at 22, he must think I'm a baby. I'm not at all.

'I didn't know what to do but I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. She said her father would never approve of us getting married so we were making plans to elope. We agreed not to see each other until we were ready to leave.

'Then, about a week later, I went to the trellis and the bastard had pulled it down. I tried everything to get to see Angela but her old man had her sent away. I was sick with worry. It took a couple of weeks to hear through a mutual friend what had happened. The old man had found out about the pregnancy and demanded she have an abortion. She refused. So one night he got a friend of his, a doctor, to drug Angela and do an abortion on her in their own home that night. When she woke up the baby was gone. She was devastated. He said no daughter of his was going to marry an army hack. He said he hadn't spent all that money on her education and finishing school so she'd marry a nobody. I couldn't find out where Angela was and I never saw her again. I did read about her years later. She'd become a socialite and married the kind of man her father wanted. But I decided then and there that nobody would ever be able to say that about me again. That's when I decided to study law.'

'Wow. What a great story. How sad. Do you still miss her?'

'Who?'

'Angela.'

Who can he think I mean?

'Oh yeah. I'll never love anyone like that again.'

'What about Jane?'

Then he tells me about his first marriage, about his two children to that wife and then, about five years ago, how he met the gorgeous young Jane, who fell in love with him. At first, he wasn't sure he loved her. But, after Jane left Melbourne, he ran after her and asked her to marry him.

'She was only eighteen when we met. Later we got married and she became pregnant with Nita almost straight away. Before that she was great. She'd be into sex any time of the day or night. Sometimes it was tender and sometimes it was as rough and animal as you could make it. She loved it all. She was so many different people. That's what I loved about her.'

He tells me some very strange sex things they did together. Then he stops talking and narrows his eyes and looks at me.

They sounded awful to me but I guess those kinds of sex games must all be part of a sophisticated adult relationship. I don't know exactly what I'd have to do to be sophisticated but I'd done lots of things that seemed strange before you'd done them a few times. Like I'd tattooed Col's name onto my ankle with a needle and thread and ink, which seemed like a pretty strange thing to do at the time. You know, hurting yourself deliberately because you want some guy's name on your ankle. It seems pretty childish now but at the time it seemed strange. But then, later, I put a love heart on my wrist and that didn't seem strange at all.

'You said she used to be great. What happened then?'

'I don't know. She had the girls and started putting on weight. She didn't want to have sex any more and then everything started going wrong. She got depressed last Christmas. She's been in the Larundel for two months. They don't know how long she'll be there but I don't expect her home any time soon.'

I guess that must be a nut house.

'Do you still love her?'

'No. Not really. She's the mother of the children and I'll look after her for their sake. But no. That all died when I came home and found her unconscious on the floor.'

I feel sorry for him. How terrible. I go and sit near him and he puts his arm around me. He looks me straight in the eyes and then takes my hand and we go up to his bedroom. That's when we have proper sex for the first time.

SOCIAL PROJECT



After I've been in the hospital for about three months, I get a phone call. No-one's called me here before. It's John. It's the first time I've heard from him since I've been here.

'I'm out, I miss you. Have you got weekend leave? We have to talk.'

Next Saturday afternoon, he picks me up outside the hospital and we eat in a Chinese restaurant. He says he's going back up north. That he's better now. He asks how I am and when we get back to the hospital we walk along the creek behind it. We have sex in the grass while I stare at the tree tops. I haven't felt so lonely since we had sex last time. I know there's no way I can do it with him again.

He rings next weekend and do you think I can tell him how I feel? No way.

'Barbie, are you ready to go?' I don't say anything.

'I'll pick you up outside the hospital tomorrow.' I can hear myself breathing into the phone.

'Are you there?'

'Yes.' I say it loud and clear because I want him to know I hear him all right. I want him to know I don't want to go without having to say it.

'Talk to me. What's the matter?' I think I'm being really clear.

'Barbie, if you don't talk to me, I'll go without you.' He says that in a threatening way like he's so sure I'll be sorry if I don't go.

But all I think is: Yes! Go.

'I'm going. When I hang up you won't hear from me again. Is that what you want, Barbie? Is that what you're telling me?'

Yes! Hang up and go! That's what my head is screaming but nothing comes out of my mouth.

The phone goes dead. How tiring. I feel sad, but more than anything, I'm relieved.

I'm still on day release from the hospital and struggling with school work but the teachers don't give me a hard time. They make excuses for me because they think I'm taking drugs from the hospital, but I'm not. Dr Hammersmith says I don't need anti-depressants because, technically speaking, she says I'm not depressed. For me to ask for help is like swimming a mile so I sit there in class and get lost. In maths they use formulas the others know already. In English, I don't even know what a pronoun is. I wonder if I'll ever pass this course.

Then one day in class we have this IQ test. After, they tell me to go to see the man who'd given us the test because he wants me to do another one.

'Have you ever had one of these before?' he says when I finish again.

'No, but I used to do puzzle books when I was a kid. We had a lot of educational toys at home.' Ha.

'Well, I don't know the reason, but you've come up with an extremely high score. You're 142, which isn't exactly genius material but it's pretty smart. What are your plans for next year?'

'I don't know. I thought I'd just do this year and get a job.'

'I really think you should do matriculation next year. You should think about university. You're smart enough and there's no reason why you couldn't do it.'

People like that just don't know people like us. It just breaks me up how he thinks that's ever going to happen. Just because they went to university they think anyone can go.

It's lucky about the IQ test though, because teachers help me more and I start understanding a bit. One teacher's really nice. She isn't even my teacher but the IQ test guy introduces us in the corridor one day. Her name's Miss Gioia. That's joy in Italian. She says to call her Mina, short for Palomina. Her clothes are gorgeous and she looks like a model to me. She's wearing a yellow jumper one day when she puts her arm around me. It's a real shock, you know, having someone you hardly know put their arm 'round you. Specially like a teacher. But boy, is it soft. I'm a bit of a baby sometimes, and, I want to snuggle into her but instead I just say, 'I like your jumper'. She says it's cashmere. I can't understand why someone like her is teaching in some old college when she could be a movie star.

She says she doesn't think 'a bewdiful younga girl' like me should be staying in a psych hospital. But I think she needs glasses. Can't she see I've got great gobs of acne all over my face?

I tell her it's not so bad. I don't say I quite like living here because that's not the kind of thing you go around saying ... Oh, my loony bin. Great place, just like home.

'You can't stay there forever. You should be with people your own age. Maybe I can 'elp you find something. Yes?'

Whatever.

When I begin to pass in tests at school, I start to think maybe I really can do matric. But university? The idea breaks me up. But I can see that with matric I could get a better job than a barmaid. I admit it's funny how last year the idea of matric seemed like something only other people did. Now, it doesn't. Life's funny like that.

'That's fabulous,' Carol says when I tell her. 'I'm doing matric next year. I'm going part-time but you could do it full-time at Sydney Tech. I know you could. What else are you going to do? You can't be a barmaid all your life. You'd be bored out of your mind.'

Carol's a big person in my life and I listen to what she says. So I think, that's settled that. If she thinks I can do it then she must be right. I'll do it if I pass this year.

Then everything starts going wrong. Mainly in my head. I don't know what sets it off. All I can say, is it's like swimming and then getting pulled down in the surf. Like when we lived across the road from Black Rock Beach and I nearly drowned from the undertow. What happens is, I start thinking about suicide again and I can't stop. The thoughts have a life of their own. They're there all the time. In the day when I have classes, it isn't as bad as weekends. That's when I can't think of anything else. You can apply for weekend leave but it isn't as if I have anywhere to go. With my sickness benefit money, I go to some doctor outside the hospital for sleeping pills.

I can't wait now I've got the pills. I sign out on Friday night and go down by the creek behind the hospital. I take all the pills, maybe a 100, many more than last time. I reckon they should do the trick. I lie down in the grass feeling happy.

It could be days or years later when I wake up feeling like a piece of vegetable floating in soup. Everything's hazy, moving in fog. I can't work out if I'm in the psych hospital or not. It looks so different. There's something coming out of my arm attached to a pole by the bed and there aren't any poles in my hospital, so I try to get up and ask someone where I am but I'm stuck to the bed by the pole trying to work out why nothing fits together while I go in and out of waking up so fast I can't even finish a thought.

Then one time when I'm awake, Paula the nurse is sitting by my bed. She's saying I'd been found by some boys down by the creek on their way to Saturday morning footy.

'Where am I?' I manage to get out. I laugh because it sounds so funny like those movies where they always wake up and say that. I try to laugh but my mouth feels like it's got soap in it.

'You're in hospital. You're lucky to be alive, you know. It was touch and go even though the boys found you pretty early. You nearly didn't make it.'

I'm still alive. I remember how much I want to be dead and start to cry, weak and pathetic because of all the sleeping pills Paula says I've still got in my blood. All I can think of is how much I want to be dead and what an effort it's going

to be now I'm still alive and why is it so hard to die.

'But why didn't ...?' I can't finish and fall asleep again. Carol visits too.

'What's happening to you?' Her freckly forehead above her brown eyes creases in a worried look. 'What's going on? I don't understand. Why? It's just not right. Why's this happening?' She keeps shaking her head. How can someone be so beautiful?

After a few more days when they take the drip out of my arm they move me back to the psych hospital. They let me spend a few days in bed because I'm still weak but what I do all day long is think about how much I want to be dead. One afternoon I can still hardly walk but I wander down to the kitchen and get a butter knife because that's all they've got in the drawers, and I start stabbing my chest with it. I know how hilarious it must look to the nurse who comes in and takes the knife off me. It doesn't matter anyway because you can jab away at yourself all day with a butter knife and nothing's going to happen because it takes more than a bloody butter knife to kill off your body and nobody knows that better than me.

I don't go back to school for a week.

One Saturday morning Gladys, who's been made to get out of bed to stare at the walls like there's no tomorrow, is chatting away in the dorm as if she hasn't been sitting around glued to one spot for nearly a year. Winter sun's coming in the door and she's smiling away chatting to everyone when suddenly she says she's hungry. Gladys is like a skeleton but she's never hungry even though they always try to make her eat. I run downstairs to get a tray and sneak it up because we're not allowed to eat in the dorm. On the way back, Sister Walkerden catches me.

'Where do you think you're going with that, young lady?'

'Gladys is talking her head off. And she's hungry.'

'Well, it's nice to see you doing something for someone else, dear. You'll be on the mend soon, mark my words.'

Well, how do you like that? When Gladys'd been a zombie she had to get up. Now she can tap dance, she's allowed to stay in bed for breakfast. The whole world's going crazy.

One day at college, Mina tells me she's found a place.

'It is with a friend of mine. He is a teacher like me, but at the university. Sydney University. He lives in a student house near it and there is a room free. Would you like to see it?'

I can hardly say I don't want to, but part of me doesn't. I'm scared. But Mina isn't going to let me off the hook. She's 'taken an interest in me' and I'm supposed to be grateful. I am. She's taken me out to the shops down the road for lunch twice. She puts her arm through mine when we walk. Australians don't do stuff like that. Even though she isn't my teacher she's told me things about study, like how to use the library. Everyone else thinks you know stuff like that but she knows I don't. She also bought me my first cappuccino. She's been saying I can't live in the hospital forever and I know she's right but don't know where else to go.

'Who else lives in the house?'

'They are all nice people. They are students like you. A bit older, mostly they are doing second or third year university.'

'Do they know I'm only sixteen and living in a nut house? Maybe they don't want someone so young. Maybe I'm not the kind of girl they're looking for.'

'Trust me. They will like you. You 'ave to think about your life. It is not going well, yes?'

She's so nice but people who have nice lives, and you can pick them a mile off, just break me up the way they expect other people's lives to be like theirs. Like they don't see other people can't do things for a whole bunch of reasons. But she's right. I can't stay in the nuthouse forever. I'm still scared, but I say I'll see the house and meet the people anyway.

Mina picks me up from the hospital on Sunday.

'How do I look?' I think I'm pretty groovy.

'Well, the white silky skirt, it is very short but I like it very much. The white shirt is like Robin Hood and I like it also. The brown sandals are very nice and the black belt, these little studs are very nice and the big silver buckle, it is like Long John Silver, no? It is nice also. Together? I am not so sure.'

I take her to the dorm and she re-dresses me. She puts me in jeans and a white T-shirt. She lets me keep the sandals and belt.

'Now you look like a university student.' She takes my arm as we walk to the car. Why doesn't everybody walk like that? I know I can't, but if I'd grown up like she must have, I'd do it every day.

There are four bedrooms in the house. It's a double-storey terrace in Chippendale, just across the road from Sydney University. It's a run down hippie looking house like the one I lived in with John. Mary lives in the top front room with Eddy, Mina's friend who lectures at the university. Mary is a boring name but she isn't boring at all. She's short with a tiny, neat little body. Her black hair goes all the way down to her waist and she has a sexy way of swinging it from side to side when she walks, even though she does wear tough old jeans and boots with little heels that you can see are made for walkin' like that song and it looks like they know exactly where they're taking her, no worries.

Eddy's got two kids and he left his wife after Mary was in his politics class last year. That's when they started having the affair. In the middle room upstairs there's Kathleen. She's doing philosophy and psychology and going out with her psychology lecturer who's even older than the Chief and Eddy but he hasn't left his wife yet. Kathleen, call me Kat, is

tall and heavy which doesn't matter because she wears hippie clothes that aren't supposed to be sexy and she's got a smart face even if it is long and horsey. Jeremy, who lives in the downstairs bedroom, is seeing a psychiatrist which makes me feel right at home even though he's the most intellectual looking of them all with his John Lennon glasses and long wavy hair like John's.

The back top room's the empty one and they say I can move in. I can't believe it at first. I keep asking myself why they want someone like me to move in. They all look so, well

... interesting isn't even a word that'd begin to tell you how they are. I think once they find out how boring I am and that I don't know anything they'll be sorry they let me move in. The main reason I say Yes, is because I can see they're not squeaky clean. In some ways they are and in other ways they aren't, because it's like they've been squeaky clean before they were students but now they're living in this big old house doing whatever they want. That's what makes me feel I can fit in. I want to live there more than anything. If I can make it work.

Dr Hammersmith says I still have to come back and see her twice a week.

'We're very happy for you. We wondered when you were going to move on.'

Mina helps move my things and gives me some towels as a house warming present. I cry.

Carol says it's the best news she's had since we met. She comes to visit and tells me to be careful of drugs.

'You've got to watch these students. They'll be handing you a pipe before you know what's happened. And you have to watch your brain you know. Marijuana kills brain cells and you've only got one brain.'

I soon find out that the reason they said I could move in had been because being in a nuthouse is very groovy. I don't know exactly why it is, but it might have something to do with the books they read. Timothy Leary, Carlos Castaneda and Carl Jung. The girls lend me all kinds of stuff to read: *Lord of the Rings*, *The Glass Bead Game*, poetry by T.S. Eliot. Jeremy lends me *I'm Okay You're Okay*. That helps me see that my mindset is that I'm not okay and that other people are okay, which isn't okay. I'm not supposed to aim for being okay and other people not being okay because what you really want is to be okay and everybody else to be okay too. That's not only okay but the only way to be a self-actualized human being. Jeremy's very smart. He's an existentialist which means he thinks a lot about being alive. But I know that's the only thing I'm better at than everybody else in the house.

Jeremy's got depression and at first seems quite excited to have someone else in the house that he can practise his psychoanalysis on. He's being psychoanalysed himself, which his doctor dad is paying for because he's worried about his state of mind.

'I let him think I'm fucked because I get off on the analysis. But money sucks anyway. It's the poison of the bourgeoisie.'

I wish I had a bit more poison. I get a sickness benefit but I've also got a part-time job as a barmaid in a local hotel. Mary works there too and she got me the job even though I'm only sixteen. She knows I've done it before so who cares if I lie about my age again. They're great like that, practical, like me. She, Kate and Eddy are saving to go overseas — they call it OS — at the end of the year because it's a kind of learning that's even more important than uni. It's the university of life. Eddy's working as a taxi driver so he can go because most of his lecturing salary goes to his wife and two kids.

Kat loves Janis Joplin and plays her records all the time. Janis is a wild child. I love the way she lived on the edge. Kat tells me all about her life and how she'd died of an overdose when she was young. She knew how awful you could feel sometimes.

There's a long wooden table in the kitchen where everyone sits around late at night eating and drinking red wine called Chianti and when the bottles are empty they put candles in them. We sit up all night with just the candles for light, sometimes until daylight comes through the red and yellow Indian curtains. There's a cooking roster and when my first turn comes I cook sausages and boiled peas and carrots but they don't like it and they soon teach me to cook other things. Mary shows me how to make a Spanish omelet and baked vegetables with garlic. Kat teaches me how to cook a rice bouillabaisse using the electric fry pan. We shop at Paddy's market every Saturday. I learn how not to buy dyed toilet paper because it ends up in the sea and poisons fish.

I learn how to sit-in when some fat pig landlord wants to knock down a historic house. People play guitars and sing and sit on the ground night and day to stop bulldozers and I take my turn sitting and have my share of the joints that get handed round to keep our spirits up.

I'm the house mascot. I think at first they like me because I'm a nutcase and they want to help. They know I'm not like them but they say there's nothing wrong with me. I'm a victim of the male-dominated medical system and need to be empowered.

'Psychiatrists play mind games, don't allow freedom of expression and fuck your head with drugs and electric shock treatment,' explains Jeremy. 'Psychoanalysis is the only kind of psychiatry that has any true value. It allows exploration of individuality and deconstruction of the essence of what it is to be human.'

Kat thinks something different.

'When women behave and do what men want they're considered sane. As soon as they start expressing how they really feel they're labeled psychotic or hysterical and are doped up with drugs that shut them up and make them good little wives again. It's insidious bullshit. If you'd stayed in that place much longer they'd have fucked your brain big time.'

I can't tell them no-one ever wanted to give me shock treatment. They didn't even give me drugs. But if they think they've saved me from the interfering, patriarchal brain fuckers who'd lobotomize me as soon as look at me, that's okay by me. I'm their social project. I don't say that my psychiatrist is a woman. I don't say 'lady' any more because that's a patriarchal word invented by men to oppress women and if you were a lady you didn't fuck around or think for yourself. Housewives are called 'ladies' but they're really just unpaid prostitutes — but a 'woman' can fuck anyone she likes where and when she wants, no questions asked. Hookers are the most honest women on earth because they say what they really want up front. I think. There are so many ideas flying around this house it isn't easy keeping track of everything.

It's only after Jeremy tells me what he thinks about psych hospitals that I see a side of Rydalmere I haven't seen before.

When I go back to see old Dr Hammersmith I stay for a while and visit the patients I've got to know. One day there's a new girl there. Becky's about the same age as me. She's been put in after she'd taken her clothes off and jumped into a fountain in the city. They had to chase her and every time they caught her she kept running away. I think she was off her face on acid.

'They thought they had me, but I was having such a good time I kept getting away.' Her eyes are shining like the devil.

I visit her twice a week when I have my sessions. She's great. She doesn't mind what they do to her. Sometimes they put her in a straitjacket to shut her up. She does what she wants. She flashes her tits at the nurses and swears because she likes to shock them. She laughs all the time. One thing about Becky though, is that she cuts herself up when she's left alone. She's got cuts all over her body. Scars that are healing as well as fresh ones.

I ask why.

'I dunno, Bubs, it makes me feel better. Kinda like poppin' a big fat boil.'

One day, about a month after she got there, they take her off for electric shock treatment. When I see her she looks like a zombie. They've turned bright-eyed, bouncy Becky into a walking corpse. She comes towards me up the winding road and she tries to smile.

I put my arms out and hug her. I think her eyes have tears in them, but it's hard to tell because it looks like they're looking right through you. Seeing her like that makes me want to take her to my new house and help her get away.

I love my house. It's fun. We're always running off to dope parties and peace marches and Turkish restaurants where you sit on cushions on the floor.

Kat and I start going to Sydney University Library together when my exams are coming up. She shows me how to use the catalogue system and how to study. Mary takes me to the caf and shows me the notice boards and how to find second hand books for when I go to uni. They don't try to tell me I should go; they all just think I'm going.

Mary says she's a pacifist, a feminist and a communist. She's embarrassed though about her rich parents and the way she talks because of the school she went to, but I don't care because I wish I was more like her strutting around Sydney Uni as though she owns the place. Mary's on the student union and that means she can make decisions. She's important and talks in front of lots of other students, which I know I could never do.

'It's working class people who need tertiary education most,' says Mary. 'We need people who know what it's like at the other end of the system to make policies for the system. For 23 years we've had the Liberals and it was fucking long enough. When Whitlam won the election he said he'd make universities free. Think of all the wasted intellect, people like you, who'd never have had the chance to go to uni before, will be given the opportunity. Gough will make it happen. God knows the fucking Liberals never would.'

Mary says 'fucking' like John used to. She uses it in a more intellectual way, though. Around here you can't be intellectual and not say fucking this and that. I reckon there's two kinds of people in the world, those who say fuckin' and the others who say fucking. I know deep down I'm a fuckin' kind of person but I don't see why I can't at least try to be different.

Listening to Mary and living in the house, where I don't think any more that they're so completely different from me, I think about being more like them. Wandering around the big old arches of Sydney Uni after studying in the library, I sometimes imagine I really am a student here, not just someone using the books and pretending.

I feel close to the Chief after he's told me all about his life. So when he takes my hand and I know we're going to have proper sex for the first time I don't mind. The only thing is, it's Sunday. I've been to Church every Sunday for the past six months in the convent. Not to mention all the other morning services they dragged us to. I didn't like getting up early, but I do believe in God.

I feel strange about it being Sunday when he starts to take my halter top off in his bedroom. Then he kisses my nipples. He takes off the rest of my clothes and tells me to stand there and not move while he kisses the hair between my legs. Can God really see everything?

'How was the other night? You liked that, didn't you?' I think he should just know that but I have to answer.

'Hmm.'

'Have you sucked a cock before, Pet? I bet you'd like that too.'

I shake my head. If God sees everything, I hope He doesn't hear everything, too.

'How would you like to have a big fat cock in your mouth? How does that sound? Do you want to try it? He stands up and unzips his fly. He sits me on the edge of the bed and puts his cock in my mouth. It's very big and I don't have a very big mouth. In fact Pommy — she draws, all her teachers said she's really good at it — she says I've got a very small mouth for my face. Anyway, maybe that's why I don't like it. In fact I feel like vomiting but that isn't very romantic.

'Don't use your teeth, Pet. Just be gentle. Thaaaat's it. Ooooooh. Thaaat's it.'

He starts pumping away at my mouth until I really am nearly sick. I have to stop myself from dry retching. He holds the back of my head with his hands and pushes himself into me. I panic and start pulling my head away and pushing him back.

'Oh, Pet. It's too fast isn't it? I know what you want. The Big Chief knows what you want, doesn't he?'

I really hope he does because that hadn't even come close. Then he lies me down on the bed and runs his hands slowly up and down my legs. This time he puts his mouth on me and licks all around me until my hips start moving in time with him. Then he stops and kisses my boobs until I'm crazy, wanting him to touch me on

my clitoris and make me come.

'You want to come, don't you Pet? Then you want my big, fat cock deep inside you don't you?

I realise by now that I'm not supposed to answer all his questions. That's lucky because I don't always know what to say. I don't like lying because it's a sin. Having his big, fat dick inside me isn't really the first thing on my mind. I've had them inside me before and haven't liked it much.

He moves his tongue back down over my belly and just brushes over the tip of my clitoris. I shudder. He does it again and again until finally he sucks it gently until I come. When I come my heart opens like it did the first time and I feel love coming on again.

Then, while I'm still trembling, he puts his big, fat dick inside me and I do like it! Just as well because this is going to be my life for a while.

'Now, tell me to fuck you Pet. Say: "fuck me, fuck me".'

I feel bad saying it but I do. It drives him crazy. I start to sweat. He goes so hard until I feel a bit like a rag doll. He goes very deep when he does that. It starts to hurt. I squeeze tears back because I don't want him to think I don't like him making love to me. And crying is hardly romantic.

After he comes I want him to kiss me. When I try he turns his head away and that stabs me in the chest a bit but I don't say anything.

Near the end of the year, Jeremy gives me a book called *The Dice Man*. The guy who wrote it, Luke Rhinehart, decided about what to do in his life by rolling dice. I'm sometimes wrong about things like that, though. I think everything I read is true. The guys in the house say it isn't about him, it's only a novel. They tease me about that. 'They're taking out the word "gullible" from the next edition of the Oxford Dictionary,' they say. I fall for it at least three times. 'Why?' I say, like I really believe it and they just laugh. Anyway, Luke Rhinehart writes six things and does the one that comes up on the dice. His idea is that living by the dice stops people from getting stale. It helps them experience life like it's new every day. As he goes on he puts down things that are more and more off the wall like having sex with men, leaving his wife and kids even though he loves them and then murdering someone. What he thinks is that people don't learn by going along with what they've always done but by doing hard things and changing their lives all the time. By stretching their idea of what they think they can do and seeing how far they can go. How fantastic! It makes me look like a hero, a dice woman instead of a nutcase. What he's saying is how our family lives. Reading that book makes us look cool instead of like freaks.

'One desire, my friends, one: to kill yourself. You must desire this. You must feel that a voyage of discovery is more important than all the little trips which the normal consumer-self wants to buy,' I read.

'The dice save only the lost. The normal, integrated personality resists variety, change. But the split, compulsive, unhappy neurotic is given release from the prison of checks and balances. He becomes in a way an "authoritarian personality", but obeys not God, father, church, dictator or philosopher but his own creative imagination — and the dice.'

Wow.

Everyone in the house has read *The Dice Man* and they say it's 'ground breaking'. I think it's something I'd be good at because I've had so much practice already. I don't bother with using actual dice because I know everybody will be doing that and I don't want to be a sheep. But I take the idea and give it a go in my own way.

I'm always thinking how to stop habits that'll get in the way of me experiencing life. I try to do it in big things and the smallest ones too. Like there are five toilets at the tech and I decide to use a different one every time. And so I don't fall into that habit, I sometimes use the same one twice. I don't believe too much in God now, but I even have Him covered — if he does exist. I stand in front of all the toilets and after a few eeney-meeneey-miney-moes, I walk fast towards the nigger's toe one and at the very last minute change direction and go into just any old one instead. Who says God knows your every move? I bet even uni students wouldn't get that complicated.

While I'm trying so hard to experience everything like it's new, with the dice game, I start getting very confused about everything. I get angry about lots of things. Like, for instance, I get caught up in the whole idea of men. I'm hearing all about feminism and equality and why should men look women up and down in the street but if you look back they think you're like a prostitute or something. I talk about it with Mary.

'Who do they think they are? Stare straight back. They can't bite.'

That's part of my dice stuff too. I decide I'm going to stare back at every man who stares at me. It's exhausting. I want them to know I'm challenging their right to look me up and down. I want them to know how it feels when a woman looks them up and down. I don't want them to think I want to root them. But the more I look the more they look at me like they think I want to root them. They don't get it at all. Half the time I end up lowering my eyes and I hate myself for being so weak. Occasionally the guy looks away first. Then I feel good.

Along with the dice man idea, I start thinking that anything nice and ordinary is stupid. Take *The Brady Bunch* on television. That's got everything that's wrong with the world. When Carol visits me in my new house, I tell her what I think of *The Brady Bunch*. I think she'll understand straight away because she doesn't like a lot of ordinary things either.

'I don't know why you hate it so much. They're just portraying loving family values,' she says. 'It might be a bit sugary, but there's nothing wrong with what it's saying.'

'But that's exactly it. No-one's really like that. And why would you want to be like that anyway. It's so squeaky clean. And so false. I hate them. Everyone hates them. Nobody's really like that stuff.' Boy, am I pissed off.

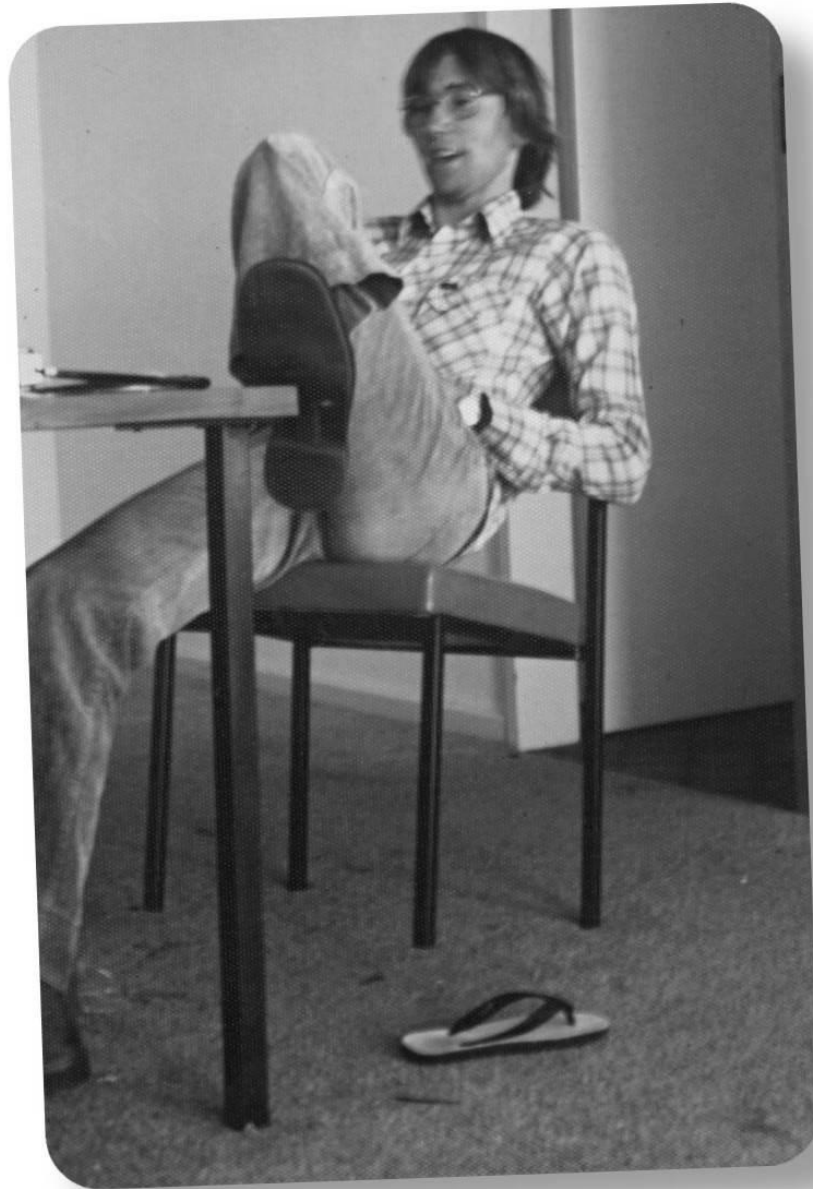
'Actually, there are people who aren't so different to that. I think what you're saying says more about you than anything else.'

What's she talking about? Doesn't she give the establishment a hard time too? Sometimes I just don't get Carol. And I

can't understand why her saying that makes me feel so bad.

We sit for our exams. I pass everything with high enough marks to get into a matric course next year. Carol passes, too, and we have a special dinner at her house. She buys wine and we clink glasses and make a toast to our futures.

GASPING FOR AIR



It's Carol who tells me the most amazing thing that makes me get a grip on myself and change my life.

Near the end of the year I get depressed again. Same as always, the feeling flies out of nowhere, sits on my head and doesn't budge. Mostly I try not to notice until it has hold of me so tight I can't shake it off. I try to talk to Mary and Kat about what's happening but I can see because they're so excited about going OS they're not too interested. When I can't stop myself from talking about how I feel, the people in the house start avoiding me. Jeremy used to like talking about existentialism but now when he's face to face with someone who's thinking so much about life they don't want it any more, he backs off even faster than the girls. One day in the library he sees me coming and goes the other way.

I'm still staring guys back but I can't help buying into what I know is in their heads about me. I'm trying to assert myself on behalf of women but then I see the look in their eyes and the whole thing fucks with my head. The more I have to look away the worse I feel. Then I start noticing how guys sit on the bus with their legs wide apart like they own the place when we women are all squished up being polite, making room for other passengers. The more I hate guys for taking up so much space in the world, the more I hate myself for being such a worm about not meeting their eyes in the street.

I start to see that some people like Becky cut themselves up on the outside and other people like me do it on the inside. The idea is to do it before someone else gets there first. Physical pain is so much simpler than the mess in your head. You can cut bits off yourself with a knife like Becky or tear yourself up on the inside. It's the same. They call it self-mutilation in the psych hospital. It's a good thing to call it because that's exactly what it is, mutilation of the self. Jeremy thinks it's just an idea to talk about, but me and Becky know it's real. Becky's right. It's like popping a huge, ripe boil.

I pop mine at Kings Cross. It's a magnet for me the way St Kilda was in Melbourne. Sometimes I think about going there and try not to because I always feel bad after what I do there. But when I try to not think about going, the idea nags at me like an itch. I scratch it by playing the dice game in my head: will I go into a strip club or hang around an alley and see what comes my way? When I get there, will I go straight home again or ask a group of guys for a cigarette? Or take some mandies to get the night moving? Whatever I do, it all leads to the same place. I always end up in strange beds with men I never see again. I get in the door of some sleazy place and take my clothes off straight away because then I'm in charge. But it doesn't change the way they always get that can't-wait-to-get-out-of-here look afterwards that makes my mantra come on with a vengeance. The mantra still works but only for a little while. The way I feel piles in on top of me until I can't breathe.

It's at Kings Cross that I take another overdose. It isn't bad. Just a way of popping that great big, fat boil. It's like I know if I go down I'll start to come up again. I don't know any other way. This time, after I've taken the pills, I ring the hospital. I'm lucky because Paula's on nightshift. She always seems to be there when I need her. She wants to know where I am but I just want to talk. She gets it out of me in the end, though, and sends an ambulance. I have to go through the whole stomach pumping thing again which is a horrible experience no matter how many times you have it done. They put a fat tube in your mouth and down your throat until it feels like you're choking to death and you fight to get it out of their hands but you're weak and they hold you down. If they knew how it felt, I bet they'd think of another way.

I'm back at the hospital for about a week before they let me go home. Carol hadn't been around much in the weeks before the suicide thing because her dad's been sick, but she visits me in the ward. Same as last time, she never asks anything about what had happened or why, but she starts talking about something that makes me sit up and listen. It's this amazing thing that helps me get through the next year without a hitch. It's fucking amazing. This light bulb goes on in my head like those Bugs Bunny cartoons when he's got a bright idea.

We're sitting on some steps leading up to the hospital dining room. There's some sweet-smelling climbing plant with purple flowers growing up the poles of the steps. She says it's called wisteria which I think is hilarious because it sounds like hysteria and isn't that a great name to have for a plant in a nuthouse? It smells really nice though. There are clouds around but the sun's about to come back again any minute. It's almost summer but the air's cold and when the sun isn't out the air's so fucking cold it hurts my face. Carol's nattering away about her dad and her oldest daughter Lisa getting a part-time job. I'm thinking my own stuff and hardly listening at all even though I know I'm being rude. Usually I hang on every word she says. Then I hear somewhere along the way that she's changed the subject. Now she's talking about the old Greeks from a long time ago.

'They had a philosophy called stoicism. It was the opposite of Epicureanism, which was the love of food and pleasure. Stoicism was the idea that you could control your feelings and will yourself not to react to pain. It was about the mind taking hold of the emotions. We've got a lot to thank the Greeks for, don't you think?'

She looks at me. That's when the light bulb goes on. Then she moves right on to other things like she hasn't said this most fucking amazing thing that I've never thought about before. You can control your feelings. All you have to do is decide. I can't believe I've never thought of it before. I thought if I felt something, good or bad, that's just what was happening and it never occurred to me to decide I didn't want to feel that way. Maybe it really is as simple as making a decision.

When she leaves I walk down by the creek. The sun's finally broken through and I'm not so cold any more. Just right there, I decide I'm not going to cry any more. Well, the least I can do is give it a go for a year. I'm always crying and I'm sick to death of it. It wears me out. I thought the depression came first and that's why I cried, but maybe it's the other way around. Maybe if I don't cry, I won't get depressed. Carol didn't say anything about sex and stoicism, but I decide if crying's going, sex has to go too. It's a dice experiment. I've had a lot of sex and maybe I need to try none. I think old Luke Rhinehart would be proud of me.

After that, days after I stop being pissed off about still being alive, everything gets like this amazing, incredible crystal clearness, like I'm a baby seeing things for the first time, or a pearl diver coming up, bursting with freshness and gasping for air.

When Mary, Kat and Eddy leave for England, there's a party. They say it's for me too because I turn seventeen in a few days. There's lots of dope and rock music and hundreds of people crammed into every room in the house. I can't believe three people could have so many friends. I invite Carol but she has to look after her kids. I don't invite anyone from the psych hospital because I know they won't fit in. I know because I'm only just fitting in myself. I think.

After they leave for OS, the house isn't the same. There are new people and everything's different. Jeremy moves out and someone takes his place. Instead of being a mascot, I'm a misfit again.

Eddy taught me to ride his motor bike then sold it to me for \$200. Now I'm seventeen I can get my first licence. I feel grown up riding a motor bike around. It's 250cc but still heavy. I'm so cool when I'm riding it, except when I fall off at traffic lights sometimes.

I get a job in Glebe Post Office on the counter until I start matric at Sydney Tech. When I resign I take a week off to go to a rock festival in Sunbury down near Melbourne. Eddy told me about it before he left and said I should go. It would be a good education for me. I take two days to ride there but on the second day with not far to go I feel sleepy, stop for food and coffee, wash my face and start again. Ten minutes down the road I fall asleep. Lucky I go to the left instead of the right, into the cars coming at me. My knee hits a white post on the side of the road before I go over the handlebars. I'm rolling in slow motion and wonder when I'll stop. It takes the ambulance years to get there and when it does the bastards won't give me any pain killers and they take ages to get to a hospital. My left kneecap's broken into six pieces and has to be taken out. The doctor says I should stay in hospital for a month. I feel lonely when the girl

in the next bed keeps getting all these visitors and I don't have any, but then her face is totally smashed up so I guess in the end I'm pretty lucky because I still have my teeth.

I phone Mother to tell her about the accident and she asks if I want a visitor but I say no. I know she won't be a very good visitor, Mother. She drives me crazy talking in a whingey voice saying 'Why didn't you stop and sleep and how could you fall asleep riding a motor bike?' She thinks she's supposed to say stuff like that but I think it's worse than having no visitors.

Classes start in less than a week and I'm bored out of my brain. After I complain to the doctor every time he comes, he lets me out after two weeks. This girl I met in the post office, called Mel, seemed to really like me. She said she wanted to go back to school next year and said we should share a house together. I ring her and tell her what's happened. She offers to come and get me all the way from Sydney.

We find a new student house together in Surry Hills near Sydney Tech where I can get a bus just a few stops to college. Mel enrolls in year ten and I enroll in the matric course. I choose the hardest subjects: maths, not the highest, but the second highest level; physics, chemistry, English and history.

The campus is spread out in separate buildings miles from the main one. It's a pain in the arse. I only have ten minutes to get from one class to another so I learn how to do a running hop on my crutches to get there in time. One, two, three and a big hop. It's murder on the armpits. The physics lab's up three flights of stairs. Once a teacher asks if I want two boys to carry me up. I do, desperately, but I'm too embarrassed to say Yes. Those stairs kill me every time. We have physics twice a week.

Maths classes start off so badly I can't even believe I don't drop out after the first week. Mr Snell gives tests that I fail every week and he shouts at me, 'I don't know why you're even doing this level — if you don't improve, my girl, you'll have to drop down.' I never do improve while he's teaching me.

English isn't any better. Denise Sheridan's the teacher. She seems old, maybe about 50 but still wears her hair long, even though there's streaks of grey in it, like she's this young girl. It's so long it reaches past her waist when she sometimes takes it out to rewind it in a loose bun. It folds around her face the way she does it up really loose. It's a bit sexy I think, but it's hard to think that she knows it's sexy because she's so old. I sometimes wonder if she does it to try to be sexy but that seems unlikely at her age.

Anyway, she makes us do essays all the time and I usually get Cs, sometimes Ds.

'You're writing's too colloquial. It's like you're down the pub.' And she smiles this crooked ironic smile. All the smart kids in the class say ironic. It's their favorite word. 'What's colloquial?'

'It's like you're chatting to someone.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Well, it's supposed to be a learned essay. Have you ever read an essay where it sounds like they're just having a chat?'

'I haven't read any essays.'

'Maybe you should.'

'Yeah, what she's saying is you've got to use big words,' says this guy Fabian. He's a short guy with glasses who sits next to a taller, pudgy guy with glasses.

'No. That's not exactly what I mean but it would help. Not just big words, but at least try to sound learned. You're all heading for university, aren't you? You've got to start learning how to sound intelligent sooner or later.'

I get off to a bad start in history as well. I read a book about the royal family in Spain. It isn't on the syllabus but I think it's interesting anyway. One day I ask my history teacher in what century Queen Marguerite was head of Spain.

'As far as I know there's never been a Queen Marguerite of Spain.'

'Yes, there was.' Wow, imagine me knowing something my own teacher doesn't know. I start thinking maybe history will be my favorite subject.

'I'm certain there wasn't,' he says.

'I read she was married to King Eduardo and he was poisoned by his brother-in-law and when she became queen she had an affair with one of the page boys and had a baby who was then going to be the heir.' I think he'll be impressed that I know so much about history.

'I'm sorry, this doesn't mean anything to me. Where did you read all this?'

'In this book.' And I reach into my bag to show him.

He turns it over a couple of times and pushes it into my chest.

'If you're going to study history, you'll first have to learn the difference between a novel, which is fiction, and a history text, which is fact.'

I'm so embarrassed I don't get over it enough to like history after that.

I see Fabian and a few other kids in the same classes as me. He's a funny kid, skinny and always twirling this tiny goatee beard. His hair's blond and he's hardly even got any hair on his face except this little beard. He looks intellectual, like Mary and Kat. The first time I notice him is one day when he starts talking to me and some other kids about existentialism and about what it means.

'It's just thinking too much about being alive.' That's what I say. I know about existentialism from Jeremy at the Chippendale house. He talked about it all the time but I wasn't that interested even though I worry a lot about being alive. I know about wanting to be dead all right which is why I don't want to read any more about it. Well, when I say

that to Fabian, about thinking too much about being alive, you would've thought I'd said a really deep thing.

'I've read a lot of books about existentialism and that's about the clearest definition I've ever heard.' Then Fabian looks at me as if he thinks I'm really smart. I feel like a fraud, though, because I don't actually know anything about existentialism.

Lalith is a tall, handsome Sri Lankan guy who sits next to me in my first English class. We hit it off straight away. I think he feels different from everyone because he's Asian and lives at home with his mum and brother in Burwood. Almost in the first week he's taking me home and his mum's feeding me this fantastic food: rice, a couple of vegetable curries and a chicken or beef curry that are always sitting there on the stove in different pots ready to eat any time of the day or night. I can be such a pig. I can't believe she feeds me all the time for no reason, but she's always telling me to eat. Lalith and I study at his place together and at the library. We're both skinny even though we eat like there's no tomorrow.

My favorite kid though, is Simone. She isn't really a kid at all but a woman. She's only nineteen but more grown up than any kid I've met. She's big, but so smart and funny everyone likes her. She doesn't know what she wants to do at uni but she's thinking about being a dentist, even though everyone says they can't imagine her looking inside people's mouths all day long. She learns new words every day and she's done a speed reading course. She can read a whole book in a couple of hours by running her finger across every page a few times. You can't believe she'd be able to understand anything because she has each page open for just a few seconds but when you ask what she's read, even if you've read the same pages in about 50 times as long, she'll know the answer to anything. She's memorized poetry and bits of plays by Shakespeare but the best thing about her, is that her favorite book's called *The Little Prince*.

It's such a little book you could hardly believe it's important but it is. It's about this prince who's a kid and lives on a small planet where a special flower grows and there are roots he has to dig up or they'll take over the planet and kill the flower. He digs and digs all day long to protect the flower but then the flower is too demanding and he finds looking after it too hard. So, he goes off to other planets and learns about life and makes friends and discovers that what he's been looking for all over the galaxy is right back home on his own planet. It's his flower. He just didn't see before that if you want to look after something and make it healthy and grow, you have to make an effort. A pretty big effort sometimes because it's not going to happen all by itself no matter how much you wish it would. Simone quotes the best part to me: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.' It's a nice story. Not the kind of story I think someone like Simone, who's so smart, would like, let alone be her favorite one.

It's so lucky I've got the 'no sex and no crying' rules because if I didn't I'd have slept with half the class by now. But this way they think I'm just like them. It's amazing how easy it is to actually fit in.

I can't believe how well it's going. And how easy it is. I start to cry and then I just say to myself: No, I'm not doing this; it hasn't got anything to do with me. It's really incredible because the tears dry up straight away before they even get going. It's like magic. Sometimes I make myself start to cry by thinking something and then I stop myself just to make sure I can do it.

Same with sex. I sit next to Lalith, but he's like a brother. I never think about having sex with him. I do fancy Fabian but I get out of that by hardly ever talking to him. I'm shy around him anyway because he's smart and from a rich family. It's his third time trying to do matric. He passes every time but not enough to get into medicine. He wants to be a doctor like his father. He's so cute I think about him a lot.

Just before the end of first term, Mother arrives from Canberra where she moved at the beginning of this year. I don't keep in touch with the family much. I know Pommy's in Sydney living with Neville. She's got Christian now and we just get on with our own lives. Peter's off in Melbourne at boarding school with Mick and Jenny's married some guy and had another baby. She lives here in Sydney, too, but I never see her. I heard she got married. Mother put Bloss in a girls' boarding school in Orange. I guess she figured the convent idea wasn't so great after Pommy and me. Where she's getting the money to pay for all these boarding schools is a big mystery to me. She stopped working on the game years ago. She said she hates sex.

She arrives in the middle of the night. Someone lets her in and shows her where my room is. She sits on the side of my bed.

'Barb? Are you awake?'

'I am now. What are you doing here?'

I haven't seen Mother since she visited me in the psych hospital after the first overdose. I didn't have anything much to say to her then. I hardly remember the visit, full of 'What did you do that for?' and 'What are you unhappy about?' I remember wishing she'd just go away.

'Your grandmother's dead. I've come to pick up Pommy and there's room in the car for you if you want to come to the funeral. It's tomorrow.' She's holding my hand and rubbing her thumb against my skin like she used to do when I was a kid. I hated it then and still do.

'How did she die?' I'm still pretty sleepy.

'She had a heart attack. She tried to get help but collapsed near the front door. They didn't find her for a couple of days. That's why the funeral has to be tomorrow.'

'I've got exams on.' I don't really. I could go but I don't want to.

'You don't have to come. I just thought I'd see if you wanted to, that's all. That means I can pick Bloss up in Orange on my way down.'

Mother's always practical. I don't ask how Bloss was going to get there if I'd decided to come.

During the whole time Mother's sitting there, she rubs my hand with her thumb. It drives me crazy. When I was little I sat next to her on the couch while she wobbled her foot up and down at a million miles an hour watching telly and she rubbed my hand like that. On a little kid's skin round and round on the same spot was agony. It felt like she was rubbing my skin off. I wanted to pull my hand away but because I wanted her to pat me, I'd put it off as long as I could stand it, but thinking about how long I'd last was almost as bad as the pain on my skin.

'Well, I better be going. We'll drive through the night and hopefully arrive in time for the funeral. It's at midday.'

'How are you feeling?' I ask.

'Oh, all right.'

'Are you sad?'

'Not really.'

'She's your mother.'

'Mmm. I've had a bit of a cry.'

After she leaves, I feel guilty. I just don't want to go. My memories of Gran start trickling down from some place while I lay in bed. Mostly I think I have no memories of being a kid. Hardly any of Gran, even though she brought us up most of the time while Mother was at work. She was a tough old boot. I don't know anything about her life when she was a kid except that she was one of two kids. She had only a brother. I don't know how she got pregnant with Mother.

I've been at the Chief's place two weeks before Gran comes to visit. She rings and says she's coming at three o'clock in the afternoon.

She's wearing her grey skirt and white blouse with the frills down the front like she's going to church or something. She shuffles in the front door past me like she's been here before. Her shoulders are all hunched as usual but she looks up at me as she passes with a kind of, well, I don't really know, but it's a knowing look. Like she 'knows'. It's all in the smile. I don't quite get what it means.

'Well, aren't you going to make me a ruddy cuppa?' she says, and slaps a packet of Monte Carlo biscuits into my hands.

I go into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

'Nice place,' she calls out from the dining room.

All the time I'm making the cuppa, I wonder if she knows. Part of me hopes she does and the other part hopes she doesn't. That part of me feels like sinking into the floor. I'd be so embarrassed for her to know what happens here with the Chief. The part that hopes she does know isn't as strong because if she did, what then?

'Where are the kids?' she asks when I come in with the tea.

'Nita's at kindy and Kate's having her afternoon sleep.' She sits there sipping her tea just staring at me.

I shift in my seat and juggle my foot up and down like Mum does sometimes.

I ask her about Pommy in the convent and Mick, who she visits at the boarding school in Sunbury. I could visit them myself now I'm down here, but I don't want to. I know it's because of the Chief and my grown up life now. And because I wouldn't know what to say, especially to Pommy. Gran tells me about them but all the time she keeps looking at me with that smile.

'Vernon's at court, I s'pose?' she asks after a while.

'Yeah. He usually gets home about four.'

'Is he all right to you?' That look again. I can hear a fly buzzing in the room.

'Yeah.'

'Does he treat you okay?' Why do I get the feeling she wants me to tell her but hopes I don't? It's like a juggling act for both of us.

'Yeah.'

I'm almost sure we both know exactly what neither of us has any intention of talking about. It sits there between us like another person in the room. At least I think it does. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm only imagining it. I'm pretty honest and my mind races to work out what I'm going to say if she asks me point blank.

Her mouth goes into a crooked line turned up at one end. It's the smile that doesn't look happy at all. It's a smile that just says she knows something. Or does it?

We sit there looking at each other for what seems like ages but it's probably only a couple of seconds. Then she says she has to catch the tram home before peak hour. She wants to get a seat.

I walk her to the door and she kisses me on the cheek. I don't remember when she's ever done that.

'Be good,' she says and gives me that smile again.

'And it wouldn't hurt you to find the energy to phone and let me know how you are now and again.'

'I will,' I say.

It's the last time I see her until I leave the Chief's house.

My strongest memory of her is half-running with a jockey's whip in her hand, chasing us down the hallway. It was like a hunchbacked shuffle. She'd always have a cigarette in her mouth.

'Come here, you bloody bastards. When I get my hands on you I'll beat the living daylights out of you.'

She hardly ever did. We'd hide on top of the wardrobe or under a bed until Mum got home when we knew she'd yell at

Gran and we'd be safe.

But any order in our house happened because of Gran. She'd wake us in the morning but the rest was left to us. We'd scramble to find our school shoes, ties, uniforms, bags. I hardly ever left the house with everything until I discovered how to find things. I'd start in a corner of the house and look in, on top, behind and under every piece of furniture until I found what I was looking for. I made the system after one day at primary school when the doctor visited and we were told to strip down to our undies, but I had a bare bottom because I couldn't find any pants that morning. It happened when I'd just started at that school and nobody would talk to me after that because I was a dirty girl who didn't ever wear undies to school. I had to just wait that school out because nobody wanted to be friends with a dirty girl. That was the good thing about moving, no matter how bad things were you knew you'd be going soon.

Even though we had to look after ourselves in the morning, when we came home from school the house was tidy and Gran would make dinner while we watched TV or, in summer, played Sevens or hopscotch in the street until it was dark. On weekends we'd play Robin Hood with newspaper hats and arrow bags with string handles slung over our shoulders. Pommy was always the games boss. She'd be Robin Hood and we'd be the merry men. On weekends Gran would stay home to clean while Pop got us out of the house with long walks, mostly to nowhere, but sometimes to the Shrine of Remembrance. There we'd have to go quietly and respectfully through the big, cold, dark rooms with names of the dead soldiers on the walls. Then we'd roll down the grass slopes that were all around the shrine and get green stains on our clothes even though we knew Gran would make her lips tight and not let us leave the table that night until we'd eaten every last pea on our plate.

Pop's wife was in a wheelchair so he didn't want to leave her but Gran was his girlfriend. On weekends they'd have a bet on the horses, listen to the races together and have shandies in the afternoon. Gran's life was housework and cooking for her six bratty grandkids. One day when she was making our Sunday roast, she was lighting the oven when it exploded. Her hair was singed and her face got burnt but Mother said she did it on purpose for attention. Maybe she did. Maybe she needed some attention. God knows she got no thanks from us.

Once I remember being in bed and hearing Gran moan. She was calling out for me to get her heart pills. I didn't want to get them. I didn't think she really needed them, she just wanted me to get up and feel sorry for her. That's what I felt like but I thought, what if I'm wrong and she really does need them and she dies. I lay there listening.

'Barb, me pills...' She groaned and gasped a bit. I don't know why I didn't completely believe her but I didn't. I laid there anyway waiting for her to go back to sleep or die. I imagined how awful I'd feel if I got up in the morning and went into her room and found her dead.

After a while I heard her drinking some water and she stopped calling. But that was even worse because what if she'd stopped because she was dead. But then she was drinking the water and maybe she was taking her pills. I couldn't sleep until the morning when I got up and went into her room and found her still alive.

'Didn't you hear me calling out for me ruddy heart starters last night?' she said.

I lied and said no.

'I could die tomorra and none of you little brats'd even know I was gone.'

And now here she is dead and I'm not even going to her funeral.

I think about how when Gran wasn't living with us, cooking and clean clothes were pot luck. The house was like a brothel and we lived like a pack of wild dogs.

'You're little bloody heathens!' Gran would shout at us when she came to visit and saw the mess we lived in. Neither Gran nor Mother knew how to make us clean the house and that's how we got to be lazy, selfish, good for nothing brats. You're lucky I don't put you in a home, Mother would say. You could be living in housing commission flats, you're such lazy bastards you might as well be instead of in the lap of luxury like the ungrateful wretches you are, Gran would shriek. Gran and Mother used to fight all the time. When I was in primary school Gran moved in and out. Whenever she wasn't there, it was murder. Nothing was ever washed and not much cooking got done. The house became like a pigsty because Mother was working all the time.

I CAN HEAR Mum and Gran fighting again. I sneak out of bed and see Mum deliberately break dead Uncle Bill's crystal glasses on the table in front of Gran.

'You want to hurt me? I can hurt you, too. Two can play that game,' says Mum.

'Frigged if I'm going to look after your bloody ungrateful brats while you're out cavorting round the bloody town.'

Their faces look mean and I can't stand the screaming in my ears so I run back to bed and put my head under the pillow. I love Mum but I love Gran too even if she is an old battle axe, like Pommy says. I can still hear the shouting so I get up and go across the road to the beach and run along the sand crying until I can't run any more. When I go home, they've stopped. Now I can get some sleep.

When I finally went back to Brisbane after being at the Chief's house, that's when I had my last news of Gran.

When Mick came home on visits from boarding school in Sunbury outside Melbourne, he'd tell how Gran used to visit. When nobody else even wrote letters, Gran made the trip with buses and trains and walking a long way to take him condensed milk in a tube because Mick hated the powdered milk they got at the Salesian Brothers. She'd bring him chocolate bars, little packets of corn flakes and leave him money to spend at the tuck shop even though her pension was a 'pittance'.

Pommy told how even though she never liked Gran because she thought she was her least favorite being as how she was so much like Mother, she'd never realised how much Gran loved her until she visited every week at the convent in Melbourne. When she'd been out of sight out of mind for the rest of us up there in Queensland, Gran made her way from her little housing commission flat to visit her every weekend. She was the only one who really cared about me, Pommy said. Then I felt terrible about all the times I never answered Gran's letters.

When I was very little Gran would put a pink musk lifesaver lolly under my pillow most nights but when I was about

eight, that stopped and I thought that's what happened when you turned eight. Bloss was Gran's favorite. She always got the lifesaver even after she was eight. We didn't find out the reason until later. It turned out to be because Mum and she had both been in love with the man everyone thought was Bloss's father. Mother said once that the guy, who'd been a truck driver from Sydney, said he didn't want to come over when Mother wasn't home because Gran made him feel uncomfortable.

I'd found out too, that when some regular clients of Mother's came to the house looking for her and she wasn't home, Gran would do them. I wondered if she'd ever done the Chief. Nothing would surprise me about Gran.

We'd been Catholics because of Gran. Every Sunday no matter where we were living, if she lived with us, she'd make us go to mass even if it was miles away. It was always miles away. The six of us would walk there with money in our pocket for the collection plate to help the needy and starving in the world. Sometimes we wouldn't go to church but spend the collection money on Dairy Queen ice creams instead, even though Gran threatened to beat us until we were black and blue if she found out we weren't at church. She'd had us baptized and we made our First Holy Communion so that we had to confess our sins. If we didn't and died suddenly we'd go to hell or purgatory with sins on our soul, especially if it was a car accident and our undies weren't clean because it was a sin to wear dirty undies. Gran always worried about little things like that.

I lie awake thinking of how Gran gave us all a small portrait picture of herself last Christmas. Her mouth was a tight line that made her look like she was sneering, even though I could see she was trying to smile. We all thought it was such a funny present for her to give us. I wonder now if she knew then she was going to die.

Then I wonder if before she died she ever confessed about the Chief. They don't exactly talk about it in the Ten Commandments but it seems like a sin to me. I guess she didn't because I never saw her go to church except for midnight mass once at Christmas. Now I don't care that if God does exist, she'll be in purgatory or hell.

I lay awake thinking about Gran, then I go back to sleep and don't think about her again for ages.

The Chief 's come home with Kentucky Fried Chicken. We sit in the loungeroom drinking Campari and lemonade. He chats about his life. And then about Mum and Gran.

'I'd get your mother to watch while I had sex with other women,' he tells me.

I squirm when he says that. Kids don't want to hear about their mums and sex. But I don't know how to tell him I don't want to hear this stuff about my mother.

'Why did you want her to watch?' I ask.

'She'd love it. She'd get off on it.'

I wish he'd stop this story. Then he's telling me about Gran.

'You know, I paid her when I picked you up.'

'What for?' I ask. Why is he telling me this about my family? 'I always give her money when she does little things for me. Like that night a couple of years ago when I tried to take you for a walk. Do you remember that? I said I'd buy you all an ice-cream if you came with me. I paid her to make you come. Ha ha. No pun intended. But you weren't ready then were you, Pet?'

I sit there confused. I don't quite believe I've heard him right. I don't want to ask about it. I want him to stop. I try not to think about what he's just said. It must be a mistake. Anyway, Gran's poor and he must have meant he was just helping her out. She's an old lady, after all.

DANGLING HIGH FLYING STILL

At school everything's a mess but from the second term things start to change. Mr Snell leaves and we all go to the pub to celebrate. We wonder how anyone could live with themselves with everyone hating them so much. Then Miss McClure comes. She's a tall, skinny old lady who you couldn't imagine had ever had sex, she was so straight looking. She always has on white shirts with the top button done right up like she isn't going to let any of that neck out for a bit of air. Then she puts on grey cardigans and long, straight grey skirts that come to just past her knees. Under that are stockings so thick you can't see any skin under them and shoes as flat as pancakes.

'Now, we'll be studying integral maths this term and understanding the concepts is very important. If, at any time, you don't understand something, it's vital that you tell me so I can go over it. Chances are if you don't understand, there'll be others in the class in the same position. So don't be shy about putting your hand up.'

That's how she starts her first lesson and that's how she goes on for the rest of the year. I can't believe it. I'm so happy. Every time she explains some maths proof on the board she turns and asks the class if there's anything we don't get. But she doesn't just ask and then keep talking like Mr Snell used to do. She waits! If she didn't wait, there's no way I'd ever put my hand up. But she looks all around the room and looks right at our faces. She can tell if you want to put your hand up but don't. Sometimes she sees this look on your face and she actually says, 'Barbara, do you want me to go through that again?' I think that's so nice of her because she knows then that all you have to do is say Yes. She always spots me straight away and it helps a lot. I go from failing every test, every single week with Mr Snell, to passing every one with Miss McClure. Then it's hard for me to even believe, but I start getting all these As.

In English, I start copying Simone. She learns new words every day so I think I'll do it too and find some way of slipping them right on in there to my essays. I have a list of ten words and make them fit in somehow. It's amazing how you can make any word fit a subject and although Denise Sheridan says it's not about using long words, she starts giving me Bs and every now and then a B++. I don't think she ever gives me an A, even though I really try to get one because she's my favorite teacher. I like Miss McClure in a different way, but Mrs Sheridan — Denise — she's a real person.

'You've changed your style of writing I see. How did you manage that?'

'You said we shouldn't use big words for no reason, but since I started putting them in you've given me good marks. I've been putting ten new words into all my essays.'

She laughs. That's why she's our favorite teacher. She can laugh at herself. No-one can laugh at themselves like her.

'Well, it's not a technique I'd recommend but it seems to be working. Keep up the good work, you're really coming along.'

She's like Pommy in a way because she does what she wants. One day when we have a long-winded student standing up and rabbiting on about something that has nothing to do with the lesson, just to hear herself talk, Denise suddenly looks up at the ceiling and mumbles, 'I'll be back in a minute', and she goes out and leaves the girl talking to the blackboard. It's so embarrassing, but not any old teacher would do that. The girl never rabbits on again.

Her saying I'm coming along and to keep at it makes me think I can write a poem. We're studying poets, A.D. Hope and Robert Lowell. Lalith's reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* and I get into it too. Stream of consciousness is in.

I'm sitting up in bed in the morning sun when I write my first verse. I think that to write a poem you have to be mysterious and meaningful like the great writers. This is what I write:

Light be morning
hung with yellow dots of Tuesday's greenery.
Dead and done Wednesday's dawn
never again to sit at bed of sick
nurse blackening skin.
Red-flagged Buddha laugh light on ocean tumult
contained by unworthy vessel
dropping pink starry moon eyes.
Look up bewildered:
Hope! Faith! Cry the night bag full.
Booklord on step darkly swim through
distorting stare at washing
dangling high flying still.
Mother's eye fixed
call quietly 'Come back!'
holding teary hand.

I think making Wednesday dead when it's Tuesday is a stroke of genius because it's pretty confusing if you try to think about it. The rest of it does and doesn't mean anything. Even though you can't make head or tail out of the words, that's good. To me my poem means something. To me it's about my good life now and saying goodbye to the old life. It's about the Chief because I mention communism disguised as the Buddha. My study and Mother are in there too. But even I know the last thing you're supposed to do with a poem is explain it. Because it makes me feel good, I memorize that poem and say it over and over to myself for the powerful peace it gives me when I reduce the terrible jumble inside my head to those few simple words.

Even though I know it won't mean anything to anyone else, some stupid part of me hopes Simone will understand it because she always sees the meaning behind words. So the next day I take it to school and can't wait to show her.

'I've written a poem. Do you want to see it?' She reads it in the corridor outside our English class. Then she looks up like she's trying to think of something important to say.

'I like the words. If I knew what they meant it would help.' She has a smile full of mischief because we both know she's trying to be kind and that she doesn't get any of it.

'It's not supposed to be obvious.'

'Well, that bit's worked really well.' I don't care that much because I only hoped she'd get it. I didn't expect she would. I rush off to tell Lalith about my first poem while Simone's showing it to Fabian who I hope will get it too but if Simone doesn't there isn't much hope anyone else will. After I tell Lalith, I rush back to Simone.

'Quick, where is it?' I say. 'I have to show Lalith.'

'Perhaps we should queue up and you could sell tickets.' I know she thinks I'm being an idiot with my poem. But I can tell by the way she says it that she thinks my enthusiasm is funny. I know you're not supposed to rush around showing everyone your poem and asking them if they like it. You're supposed to write them and not say anything and people

are supposed to tell you how great they are or not tell you anything and you're supposed to be cool and pretend you don't care. But I don't worry about any of that because I want to show the world. I go inside the classroom to show Lalith.

'Yeah, it's really good. I mean, I like it. It's so...so... It's good. I'm not saying it isn't, but what exactly does it mean? Like, is it supposed to mean something?'

I laugh. Even though nobody gets it I think, *I'm a poet*. I write more after that. Poems about sombre trees that are me and leafy dappled waters green, with rhythms like *Under Milkwood*. I write my poems and read them over and over afterwards.

I show one to Fabian about a hole turned inside out.

'Is that where your iron's gone?'

'What do you mean?'

'Your clothes are never pressed. Don't you have an iron?' Pressed. What kind of a word is that? Even though his father's a doctor you don't think of Fabian as a guy who comes from a rich family. You forget because he wears jeans like everyone else, but when he says words like pressed, that's when you remember he is rich. I look down at my little knitted cardigan and he's right. It has wrinkles all over it and so does my skirt. I hadn't thought about wrinkles in clothes before. All of a sudden I don't feel very good about the way I look. I guess nothing ever leaves Fabian's house unless it's pressed.

'Funny thing is, you always look good anywTech, I don't see Carolay.' When he says that he looks me up and down like he's just realised I'm a girl. We talk a bit during the year but he's never looked at me like that before. I'm so happy because I know that means he still likes me even if my clothes aren't pressed. It means he isn't thinking about my clothes at all but what's under them. But it isn't in a sleazy way at all.

I start ironing my clothes. It's from then on I start thinking about Fabian all the time. I liked him before but I never thought I'd be the kind of person he could like. But after that day, even if I can't see him, I know when he's near me. I try not to think about it but it's hard not to because he's in most of my classes. But he only seems to talk to me when I'm with other people which makes me think I'm wrong about him liking me and that he isn't interested at all. Since I'm not having sex I think it's probably just as well.

After I start going to Sydney Tech, I don't see Carol much. She's going to another tech somewhere closer to her house but we still see each other a few times in the year and talk on the phone sometimes. Half way through the year after I've shown her a couple of my poems she talks to me about a place called the Council of Adult Education where you can do courses. She says there's one on poetry writing.

'You should have a look at what they offer. You might find something else you like. It's always good to have some hobbies.'

I think about it and it seems weird starting something for no good reason because why would you go out of your way to find more things for yourself to do when you already have all these things you have to do. Like anyone has time they want to fill in. Still, I think this is supposed to be a year when I'm doing the dice and I'm supposed to be giving new things a go.

So I sign up for this poetry writing course on Monday nights and The History of Music on Thursday nights. I don't know why I do the music one. I hardly ever listen to music but I had learned the piano for a couple of months when I was ten. Then the piano teacher died and we never got another one. I remember though, that when Pommy cheated by changing the timer on our practice clock, I did too but then I'd practise when no-one was listening.

It's at the music class that I meet Fred. He looks like Jesus Christ would look if he ever got very old. He has long grey hair and a beard. He looks about 90 but I find out he's only 55. We talk a bit after the class a few times and then he asks me if I want to come to his house for a drink. I've never met anyone like him before and that's why I say Yes.

We walk up a lane not far from the tech, in a wooden gate and up a path to his back door. Inside, I've never seen anything like it. You can hardly see the kitchen. It's covered in dishes that need to be washed and there are packets and bags and boxes of things everywhere. There are stacks of tins and newspapers and all kinds of shit on the floor.

'I can say from personal experience that Mr Crisp is absolutely right. He said after four years, the mess never gets any worse. I think it's after two.' He's got this really classy British accent. 'You do know who Quentin is, I suppose?'

'Not really.' I'm brave to admit that because he says it like:

how could I not know?

'He's a famous gay gentleman in London who hates housework almost as much as I do.'

After the kitchen we go up a step and into the lounge room. You'd hardly know it was a lounge room though. There's a path you can walk through with stuff on every inch of floor. There're also loads of mattresses leaning against the walls.

'It's wonderful, I can listen to music any time I like, up as loud as I like, and the neighbors don't hear a thing.' He laughs this great, merry laugh like a little kid. 'Now, I'll show you what I mean. What can I play for you?'

He's got stacks of records leaning on things everywhere around the room. He says records shouldn't lie down on top of each other because it wrecks them. He starts hunting around through a couple of piles. God knows how he knows where anything is because there are hundreds and hundreds, maybe even thousands of records here. He points to some cushions on the floor, meaning he wants me to sit down. Near the cushions there's the only really beautiful thing in the room, maybe even in the whole house. It's a coffee table that has a stand like an old tree trunk. I touch it and run my hand over the top.

'Do you like it? It cost a fortune. It's made from a solid piece of red gum. It's truly magnificent, don't you think?'

'Yeah. It's really nice.' I keep stroking it. He stares at me for a minute. I don't know what to say then, so I ask what he's looking for.

'You'll see.'

It ends up being the *The Rite of Spring*. He tells me it's written by a Russian called Stravinsky. I don't know anything about music. The only time Mother ever played records in our house was a couple of times when she taught us to dance. I remember songs like *My Blue Heaven* and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. When I was a kid I loved those songs. But I don't know anything about classical music, which is what this is, so Fred tells me about the history of it. He says that when people first heard this one a lot of them thought it was music from the devil and some walked out. He tells me heaps about music and we listen to lots of other records that are his favorites, like Beethoven and Bach. I don't know where I've heard about them but I know the names. There's also a French guy called Debussy and he carries me off to a romantic place where I wish someone would love me like in a poem. We sit with a candle burning for a few hours and it's like we're in a fairyland.

After we've been sitting there for a bit, he goes to the kitchen and comes back with this amazing drink.

'It's like the nectar of the gods, isn't it?' He takes a sip, then smooths his moustache down.

'What's in it? It's really fantastic.'

'I soak dried apricots in water overnight and then put honey in the apricot water. I eat the apricots for breakfast. It's rather clever, don't you think?'

I never forget that drink. The whole thing's like *Alice in Wonderland* and I've fallen down a rabbit hole and landed here in this crazy room with this weird guy.

When we're talking, my eyes keep going to a mattress in the middle of the floor with bedclothes on it. I hope he doesn't have plans for me and that bed. When it gets later and later I can't stop thinking about it. I'm so glad when my eyes started drooping and he says I can stay in the spare room upstairs.

'If you can ignore the mess. It's no better than here. I have to start work at nine. Public service, just like Quentin. You can sleep in and just close the door when you leave.'

I see Fred again after that and he says if I'm unhappy where I'm living, I can move into his spare room. He says there'll be no strings attached. He says that, but it isn't a huge surprise when he tries to have sex with me on the second night after I move in. I feel guilty though and sorry for Fred but when I decide something I don't let anything get in my way.

For the rest of the year I know Fred wants to have sex with me. He never says anything but I have a radar for it. I don't say anything and pretend I don't notice even when he gets pneumonia, just near the end of the year and he does this big dying act on me. I know that sounds mean, but you had to be there. I know he wants me to love him. He's sick all right, but it's like he's exaggerating it because he wants me to feel sorry for him. Even though I know he can't deliberately get pneumonia to get sympathy from me, I still think he's trying to make me feel something I don't. He's very pissed off with me about that. I try to ignore it. I get him drinks of water but that's about it. When he gets better he goes on a holiday and I'm so glad.

While he's away, it's right at the end of classes for the year, it's a huge shock when Fabian asks me out on a date. For one thing, he hasn't said anything about being interested in me all year. Where I come from if you like someone you're at it in five minutes. You don't wait a whole year and he can't have just realised it just now after we've seen each other around every day all this time. Second, I've gone almost a year without sex. And I haven't cried or been depressed once either. Everything's going so much better and I'm scared of everything going wrong if I have sex again. I think a date will have to mean sex after. The other thing is that it's the first time I've ever been asked on a date. It's mainly because of that that I say Yes. It's also because I think I'm in love with him. That really is crazy because we haven't even touched each other or kissed.

The date's a university ball. He tells me he has these friends he's been to school with and they're doing second year uni and he hangs out with them. They're going to the ball together. I'm so happy and scared. Like Cinderella must have felt when she found out she could go to the ball. I've been day dreaming about this all year and now it's finally happening.

Fabian seems shy but isn't really. He's pretty confident in a shy kind of way. Everyone knows he's witty and he also likes to talk about metaphysics, nihilism and existentialism a lot. Mostly when I'm with him I feel like a shag on a rock. That's like, incredibly boring. That's why I decide if this date's going to work at all I'll have to make some effort to be incomprehensible.

Fabian's supposed to pick me up from Fred's house at 7.30. That's a good start because Fred's house is incomprehensible all by itself. I get dressed early because it isn't like I have anything else to do all day. I'm ready by 5pm, just sitting there, thinking about how I'm going to make this date work. Then I have a brainwave. At about 7.15 I take off my dress, turn the lights off and put on Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* on the highest volume. The plan is, when Fabian arrives he'll think I always sit in the dark listening to loud classical music and that I'm so absorbed in it I've forgotten he's even coming.

When I hear his knock at the door I don't answer at first because I'm pretending to be too absorbed. Then I open the door, trying to look a trifle surprised.

'Oh. It's you. Hi,' I say.

He smiles while he's looking down my dressing gown to Fred's gigantic tartan slippers that I've put on so it doesn't look like I'm trying too hard. I don't want him to think I'm going to too much trouble.

'Come in. I just have to put my dress on.'

'Do you think you could turn the music down a bit?' He has to shout.

I turn it down a lot, tell him I'll be back in a minute and go upstairs in the dark to put on my dress. I'm so nervous I'm shaking. I can't see where I'm going, either, so on the way down the stairs I trip over my dress and fall a couple of steps. After I recover from that, I glide down a few more steps, stop, trip again and slide the rest of the way to his feet.

'Are you stoned?' That's what he says when I get there.

'No. What makes you ask?' He doesn't answer and looks at me sideways.

While we're walking out, even though he's holding my arm, I trip down almost every single one of the garden steps because my legs keep collapsing under me.

'Are you sure you haven't had a smoke?' He asks that again when he has me inside the car. I guess he thinks I can't fall down any more in there.

I give him an ambiguous stare and smile. If I haven't been smoking, how else can I explain becoming a paraplegic at such short notice?

When we get to the dance, the guys are wearing black suits just like Fabian's. Some even wear tails like Fred Astaire used to. The women are in ball gowns and look like movie stars. They seem so grown up. Fabian's friends laugh at each other's jokes and seem witty and intellectual like him. I know they're probably rich as well and that doesn't help me feel less intimidated. Then I get another great idea. I decide to be silent and mysterious. I think I'll do that as long as I can before getting stuck into being really incomprehensible. I've worked out by now that if you don't say much, people imagine you to be all the great things they wish they were.

It works. Fabian dances with me and I think I dance okay because I've got good rhythm. I haven't said much, but Fabian's busy with all his friends anyway. Some try to talk to me but I give pretty short answers and they go away thinking how mysterious I am. The band's packing up and I'm standing there smiling like I'm enjoying watching everything even though it's like agony wondering how I'm going, but I'm just so happy being there. Even though it's hard to shut up because when I'm not trying to have an air of mystery about me I usually talk my head off.

Then Fabian takes me by the hand and we go outside. We sit together on the grass not saying or doing anything. I want him to kiss me, but he sits there playing the same game, so I decide to be matter-of-fact and theoretical.

'If I went up to that tree there and touched it gently and kissed it tenderly and told it that I liked it a lot, I wonder what it would do?' This is my first big time mysterious moment.

He puts his hands around my face and looks at me tenderly then kisses me gently on the forehead and says he likes me too.

Then he pulls me up by the hand. We say goodbye to his friends and he starts driving me home. On the way, I'm sitting there desperately trying to think of something profound and obscure to say before we get back to my place. Something that will make him think I'm meaningful and philosophical. Just then we're driving past a park on my left and bingo, I get it. The perfect thing, my second big mysterious moment.

'I wonder what the ants in the corner of the park are thinking about?'

Fabian looks at me sideways.

'What?'

Straight away I know I haven't been mysterious at all. I've been a dickhead. What else can I do except say it again. I can't not answer.

'What on earth does that mean?'

I feel stupid not answering but I can't say it again. I hope he'll feel like an idiot for not knowing what I mean. If people say things you usually imagine that they're making sense, so I hope he thinks I must be making sense and that he's being thick. But really, I know he knows I said this weird thing. We drive on, both embarrassed because neither of us says anything until we get back to my place.

When we arrive he gives me a quick peck on the cheek and then leans back into the seat. Like, that's it for the night. Then he says:

'Probably best if we don't mention to the others we went out.'

'Mmm. Good idea. Thanks for inviting me. See you tomorrow.'

I try not to run out of the car but that's what I feel like doing. The night's been a disaster but I don't even care because it's my first date. I lie in bed feeling like Cinderella again.

I make plans to go overseas for a year after the matric exams. Early in the year, as soon as the plaster came off my leg after the bike accident, I got a job as a barmaid four nights a week and weekends. Now I've saved a lot of money. Mary and Kat said travelling is a better education than anything else you can do, so that's what makes me want to try it. I've been going to Sydney Uni Library to study after work until midnight most nights and I've been getting A's all over the place. Everybody around me is going to uni next year and I get swept up in the whole idea. Lalith applies for politics and Fabian is trying for medicine again. It's him who finally sets Simone straight.

'If you do dentistry you'll die of boredom. The way you argue a point I can see you at the bar. You should do Law.'

She looks at him like he's turned a light on in her head. We sit for our exams in our own building. We don't have

to go to some big centre like high school kids do. I do my best work in tests. I don't know why, but it's like everything becomes clear as a bell when I'm under pressure. I finish the maths exam an hour early and go over and over the questions. When they say time's up I almost run upstairs to Miss McClure's office. She never gets excited about anything, but she does seem a bit nervous about me.

'How did you go? Do you remember the questions?' It's like she's trying to hold herself in, she's that excited.

It's great, because I remember every one of them. We go through all my answers. It's really amazing. I get them all right. I think I shock her a bit because after we do the last one I give her a big hug and kiss on the cheek. I nearly knock her out doing it and she goes red as a beetroot but you can tell she likes it.

'It's all thanks to you.'

'Nonsense. You did the work. I'm just a bit concerned about the last question. You got the right answer but you didn't use the proof. That was probably the most important and difficult question. I don't know how they'll treat that when it comes to marking. How did you know the answer without using the proof?'

'I don't know. It just seemed, like, obvious that if you want to use the least metal in a can the diameter and height have to be the same. That's all I say in my answer. I don't know how to do the proof.'

'Well, let's just be grateful you used common sense. People forget maths is nine tenths common sense. And let's hope the markers use some too and give you full marks for it. Now, have you given any thought to what you might do next year, dear? You've really done remarkably well when you think where you started.'

'I haven't got a clue.'

'Have you thought about doing maths at university? Your improvement's been exceptional and it would seem a shame not to use your talents. Actuarial studies is the most difficult course you can do, but I'd say one of the most rewarding as well.'

I don't know anything about what I'm going to do next year, so I tell her I'll think about it. Then I thank her again.

'I know you don't really believe me but if it wasn't for you I wouldn't have even passed.' She just looks at me and shakes her head. Then wishes me good luck.

Things have got pretty bad at Fred's house. When he got back from his holiday he said he was pissed off with me for being horrible to him when he had pneumonia. I know it's really about me not having sex with him. One night I come home and find all my things outside, the house locked and my keys don't work any more. He could have just asked me to leave. I've bought my ticket to go to India for a year and I only have four weeks to go.

Fabian knows a couple of nurses who have a spare room at their place in Bondi. He asks them if I can stay for a month and they say yes. The good thing is that because they're Fabian's friends, I think I'll get to see more of him before I leave. I'm right about that.

A week after I move in, Fabian comes over and says he's seen our exams posted on the notice board. He tells me I got the top mark in my level of maths in all of Sydney Tech. He looks impressed. I'm still in love with him but since our date he hasn't shown any interest.

But this day he stays around for brunch even though everyone else has gone to the market. He reads the newspaper while I have a shower. When I finish and come back into the kitchen, he grunts: 'Just look at this. I can't believe it. On page seventeen there's a story about 2000 people who've died of starvation in Bangladesh and the top story on page three's about some fat woman who's been trapped in a car for three days after an accident. Does it matter? Who cares about some fat woman who isn't even dead?'

'Well, I don't think you should hold it against her just because she's fat. My mother's fat.'

'It's not because she's fat. It just doesn't mean anything in the big scheme of things. Anyway, your mother can't be this fat. This one's humungous.'

'Well, she can't be as big as my mother. Does it say how much she weighs?'

'Thirty stone, or more than 200 kilos. That's like nearly three of me.'

'Well, that's pretty amazing. That's exactly how much my mother is. Thirty stone.'

'You're kidding. You're such a little thing.'

'No, I'm not kidding actually. How did she get trapped in a car for three days?'

'She'd driven from Canberra to Mackay in Queensland nonstop and fell asleep at the wheel.'

'Hang on. My mother lives in Canberra. What's her name?'

'Patricia Fitzpatrick.'

'Show me that.' I start reading. 'That's my mother!'

She's driven over a cliff and broken her leg and ribs and not been found for three days. Nothing to eat or drink and almost died of dehydration.

When I look up, Fabian's staring with his mouth open. Then he laughs.

'You're having me on?'

'Nah. It's my mother. When we moved from Melbourne to Brisbane years ago she used to drive us up and down. She's a maniac when she wants to get somewhere. I always thought she'd fall asleep at the wheel because she used to get so tired. But she never did. I guess it's caught up with her.'

'I didn't mean all that stuff.' He touches my arm.

I remember when people used to say things about Mother's weight I'd feel terrible. I don't any more. Now I'm used to it.

So, two weeks before I'm about to go overseas, I buy a plane ticket to Mackay to go and see her.

The night before I leave, Fabian wraps his hands around my face like he did on the night we had our date. I think he's going to kiss me passionately and longingly because he won't be seeing me again for a year. He doesn't. He kisses me meaningfully on the forehead and almost runs down the stairs as fast as his little legs will take him.

That afternoon I fly to visit Mother. It's the first time I do anything just for her.

BETTER THAN LUNA P ARK



When I walk into Mother's ward at Mackay hospital, she's sitting up in bed wearing a crocheted pink bed jacket that makes her look like a Christmas present, her good foot sticking out of the sheets making slow circles in the air. There's balls of wool and bunches of flowers everywhere. She's knitting.

We crash around trying to kiss each other and I wish I'd avoided that but when you've come all the way up from Sydney you have to do something.

'Well, how's everything? Where'd all the flowers come from?' I'm still practising at being what I think a daughter's s'posed to be like. But I'm not very good at it because I hadn't thought of bringing a present or anything.

'I'm great.' You can see it's true even though she's lying there all smashed up. 'The ladies here have been great.' She says 'great' all the time, with great enthusiasm. 'Someone visits me every day. They bring meals and wool and aren't the flowers beautiful? I reckon half the town's visited. They've bought soap and nighties, one lady even made this matinee jacket. Isn't it beaut? They've been just great.' I haven't seen her this happy in years.

'What ladies are they?'

'Well, the ladies of the town. I don't really know who they are. Some kind of country ladies association or Rotary or something. But they've been just great. They're really looking after me.'

I'm sure she's told these old ladies all about her kids and her two grandkids as if she's any old mum like them.

'But how did they even know who you are or that you needed looking after?'

'Through the accident!' Mother whines. Her voice goes up and down on the last word like she's saying even blind Freddie can see that.

'It's been in all the papers and on telly here. It's big news.' Up and down.

'It's big news in Sydney, too. It made page three. How's your leg?' The my-god-I-gave-birth-to-a-moron tone drives me crazy but I try to ignore it.

'Well, they operated and put some pins in it. They think I won't be able to walk for a couple of months. I've broken a couple of ribs too.' She's not that interested in telling me about her aches and pains. I thank my stars that it bores her too.

'How did it happen? You never fall asleep driving.'

She's driven up and down from Melbourne to Brisbane more times than I can count. She drives like she's possessed, with kids crammed into every nook and cranny. Sometimes she'd recite 'I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of rugged mountain ranges of droughts and flooding rains...' At the end, her voice would get deep and theatrical. Or she'd get us to sing old McDonald had a farm or ten green bottles hanging on the wall even though we're too old for it. Anything to keep her awake.

I settle onto a spare spot on the bed and take off my sandals. Mother stares at my legs.

'You've got beautiful legs, you know. I'd kill for legs like that.'

I ignore that too. Sometimes I squirm under Mother's gaze. It's like she wishes my body was hers or that she has some claim on me or that she's undressing me with her eyes. Not in a lewd way but in a way that connects me to her closer than I want.

After I've been at the Chief's place for about a month Mum calls and asks me to come home. I say no.

'Why not?'

'There's nothing there for me in Brisbane.'

'What about Col?'

I wonder how she can ask me that. Wasn't it because I was sleeping with him that she put me in the convent in the first place? Nothing in my family makes any sense at all.

'I don't want to go back.'

'Why don't you come and go to school up here?'

The whiney tone in her voice makes me stop listening. I can't help thinking she's only saying it because she thinks that's what mums are supposed to say.

'I don't want to. I'm happy here.'

A week later I get a call from Col.

'We're in Melbourne, me and Rick. We've come to take you home,' he says. I can't believe he's come with Rick, the guy who raped me the night of Col's birthday. My birthday. I say I don't want to go but he says they'll be 'round to pick me up in half an hour to talk.

My heart's racing. I'm flattered they've driven all this way down from Brisbane to get me. Then I think about seeing Col again. Rick again. Leaving the Chief. Going back to the crowd of Gravatt Boys who all rape girls. All the girls I know up there have been raped. One put a mate of theirs in jail. His mates went around and broke her arm. At least that's what they told me.

Soon I hear a horn blast and I go out and get in the car. It feels like I've got into another world being in the car. Seeing them again. We drive to the local pub for a drink.

'I love you. Come back with me,' says Col.

'I don't want to. There's nothing there for me any more.'

'She's prob'ly rootin' 'im. I told ya,' Rick says to Col. He doesn't even look at me which is just as well because his eyes are very bulgy.

'What about me?' says Col.

I don't say anything. I never can when I have to say no to a guy.

'I don't know, I just don't want to go, that's all.'

Col's eyes look hurt and helpless.

'Look, here's the number where we're stayin'. We're leavin' in a couple of hours. If you change your mind ...'

When they drop me back, the Chief looks at me like I've been mixing with dregs.

'You don't toot your horn when you pick a girl up. You come to the front door. They must be right low life. No manners.'

Where before I felt flattered that someone bothered to come such a long way just for me, now I suddenly feel

ashamed. And glad I've decided to stay with someone who has some class.

It's the weekend and the girls are at their grandma's house. The Chief bought Chinese for dinner and we're sitting on the couch afterwards.

'Why don't you dance for me, Pet. I'll put on some music.' He moves to the record player and chooses something I haven't heard before. Something slow. I don't know what to do.

'Come on. You know how to dance don't you?' he says. He's annoyed.

I start swaying a bit from side to side. I love music but don't know what he wants. I've danced in front of a mirror at home before, but that was to the Monkeys. This is slow music and I don't know what to do.

'Come on. Just pretend you're dancing with Linda at home.' I remember then some hazy memory of him catching us dancing after a bath one night when me and Pommy were kids. I just walk around the room trying to do what he wants. The more I move, the more I know it isn't right. He sighs and sighs.

'Jesus. Stop. Just come here. You're hopeless.'

I ask Mother about the accident.

'Oh, I don't know. I'd been driving all the way from Sydney without a break and I was planning on stopping to sleep at Mackay but I never made it.'

'What were you coming up for anyway?'

'I met this bloke and he said he was moving up here, so I followed him,' Mother says it as though it's in the distant past. It's hardly worth bothering getting too attached to today when the whole world can change tomorrow.

Her foot doesn't stop making the circles and I notice my toes pumping up and down like pistons working overtime. I stop mine quick smart.

Even though she seems to be over this guy, the fact that she followed him anywhere surprises me. Mother doesn't follow guys around. Even though she's fat, she's had her share of interest from men. Like skinny Ken, the electrician who blinked and sniffed a hundred times a minute and bought us Chinese food on Friday nights even though Pommy and I made terrible fun of his affliction. And Lionel, who bought the Hollywood Grove house which Mother up and left to pay rent somewhere else with her six ungrateful brats even though she could've lived there and never been thrown out again for not paying rent.

The last guy Mother liked was the alcoholic politician who made her want to gas herself when I was in the convent. But that was three years ago.

'Well, it was about nine o'clock and I'd just stopped to get something to eat. I remember being really tired and thinking I've gotta stay awake because there was only about half an hour before I got to Mackay. Anyway, the next thing I'm sailing through the air and rolling down this hill. Just rolling 'round and thinkin' I'm never going to stop.'

'That's how I felt when I had the bike accident,' I say. 'It's like everything was in slow motion.'

'Yeah. That's exactly what it was like. Anyway, when I

stopped I was on me head.' She laughs.

'The car was on its roof and a big trunk I had in the back must've fallen forward and was pressing on me neck. I could feel this awful pain in me legs and ribs but I thought someone'd be along any minute. I couldn't move 'cause I was wedged between the seat and the steering wheel. I think being fat saved me bloody life because I hardly moved when the car rolled. When I stopped, I started yellin' for all I was worth. I thought someone must've seen me go off the road but it was late and there wasn't much traffic. No bastard came, so I just lie there upside down. I must have passed out at some stage 'cause when I woke up it was just getting light. I was that thirsty, you've got no idea. I had a bottle of coke but I couldn't get to it. I couldn't do any bloody thing. I'd call out every now and then but I knew no-one could hear me. I just lay there thinkin' about what I could do. Which wasn't much. I figured as soon as the daylight came someone'd see me from the road and call for help.

'I must've gone unconscious again 'cause by the time I woke up, the sun was right overhead. It got so bloody hot I was swimmin' in sweat. That's when I thought this might be it.'

She looks into the distance when she says that.

'With the bloody trunk pressing down on me neck, I was that sore. That's what stopped me getting to the coke. Anyway, it was the next day I think, I set up a pile of twigs and paper outside the window so I could light a fire to attract attention in case a plane came. Well, it bloody came all right. I reckon it must've been the day after that I think, it was all a bit of a blur as you can imagine, I heard a crop duster or something and managed to reach the cigarette lighter and lit a bloody fire!'

'Wasn't that the plan?'

'Well, it was, but then the bloody rubber of the car door caught on fire and started blazing away like billy-o. I thought I was gonna fry meself into the bargain.' She laughs again at the thought.

'What did you do?'

'Well, nothing. What could I do? I just sat there and waited. I was sure I was gonna be incinerated. But then when the rubber 'round the window finished burning the fire just went out on its own.'

'So what about the rest of the time? You were there three days, weren't you? Weren't you in pain? Like the broken leg and ribs and everything?'

'Well, I was unconscious a lot of the time but I'd drift in and out. The worst part was me bloody neck with the trunk leaning on it. And being upside down was no fun either, of course. But then on about the third day I think, I saw this old hobo and he wanted money for grog.'

She laughs and her belly moves like jelly.

'I told him I'd give him all the money I had if he'd get help for me. I don't know if he was real or a hallucination. I'd pretty much given up hope of ever being found by then. I just thought about all you kids and got ready to die. Slow like.

'Then, when the farmer came, ooohh, it must've been later that same day I think, I didn't know if he was real or a bloody hallucination. When he went off to call an ambulance I begged him not to go. I thought he'd never come back. Anyway, he did. It seemed like a bloody lifetime but when he came he had the police and the ambulance. They even had a bloody tow truck. He must've told them how big I am. They hauled me up with a tow truck. It was that embarrassing, you've got no idea.'

'It must've been awful.'

'It was.' But she's bored again now. The tea lady comes in with a cuppa. Mother smiles and asks about the tea lady's sick mother who she's looking after at home. They smile and talk and I can see that the tea lady thinks Mother's salt of the earth. I wonder why it's so much easier for everybody else to like Mother than for me.

When the tea lady goes out we don't know what to say to each other. Mother doesn't seem the tiniest bit uncomfortable about it but I am. She stirs her tea a million times. She's always stirring her tea a million times. I mean it. We both watch her stirring the tea and I think, lucky she had the car accident story otherwise we wouldn't have anything to talk about.

Eventually I tell her about school.

'I passed everything and I've applied for a maths course at Macquarie Uni. But I'm deferring for a year.'

'What's that?'

'It means if I get in they'll hold my place for a year while I go overseas.'

'Well, that's great. Pass me the biscuits will you, Barb?'

You can't tell Mother too much because she's got the attention span of an ant.

'And what will you do next year?' She's busy dunking her biscuits in the tea.

'I just said, I'm going overseas for a year. I'm going to India.'

'What would you want to go there for? It's a dirty horrible place.' She's screwing up her nose and eating her soggy biscuit with her pinky sticking out. Even when there's fat from Kentucky Fried dripping down her chin she'll still have that pinky out.

'It's cheap. It's the only place I can afford to go for a year on the money I've got.'

She doesn't say anything else. She doesn't ask anything about my life or the people in it. Now I'm bored with being here. I tell her I'll visit again tomorrow. I lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

'Don't forget to bring some food. Kentucky Fried'd be just the thing.'

'How could you think I'd forget?'

I'm staying at a youth hostel down the road. There's not much happening in Mackay. I've got a room to myself and I forgot to bring something to read so that means I'll have too much time to think. If the restlessness hits, it's dangerous. We're all like that in our family. We like to keep busy because, even when we were little, having time on our hands was torture. Anything was better than doing nothing: backgammon, cards, crosswords, checkers and jigsaws. Who can clack the knitting needles fastest? Fast game's a good game, Come on! Move! What's there to think about?

I go for a walk around the town and end up wondering why I'm here.

If I'm honest I know part of the reason is because when Fabian knew Mother had been in the car accident he asked when I was going up. How could I say it wouldn't have occurred to me if he hadn't asked? Visiting is optional in our family. If you happen to be around the corner, or at least in the same city, you might visit after an accident or a baby if it isn't too much trouble and you have a car or want to borrow some money. Otherwise you don't bother. For instance, when I had my motor bike accident no-one visited, although to be fair, Mother asked if I wanted her to. But I think you don't ask someone if they want a visit because they should know that when you're laid up in a hospital bed watching everyone else get visitors you wouldn't mind one of your own even if it's someone you hadn't seen since primary school. So for me to visit Mother when I'm about to go overseas any second isn't the done thing, but I can tell she appreciates it and it makes me feel like a normal daughter. No-one else in the family has visited and I'm pretty sure Mother doesn't expect anyone either.

And here I am spending time with Mother on my own. I can hardly remember times I've been alone with her in my whole life.

I'VE JUST STARTED SCHOOL and Gran and her boyfriend, Pop, are taking us to Luna Park. That and Christmas are the two best things we do all year, even better than birthdays. The Giggie Palace is my favorite because it gets you laughing even before you go in because of the obstacle course that blows your dress up and shows your undies and makes you laugh no matter how many times you go. Inside there are steep slides, four of them, one straight so you go so fast and the others with different kinds of bumps that throw you into the air and make you squeal with fright. Outside there's the ghost train that's scary because it's dark and things touch your face and there could be spiders. We always get fairy floss and ride the merry-go-round, which isn't exciting but how can you go to Luna Park and not go on the merry-go-round? Before we go home we pass the clowns where you put balls in their mouths and you have to beg Pop and

Gran to have just one go and they say no but always give in and if you're lucky you win a stuffed toy or a pencil with a rubber on top. It's Sunday and we're having roast chicken. Gran says if I don't finish my peas I can't go to Luna Park and I'll have to stay home with Mum, who's cleaning the house because all us brats will be out of the way. I don't believe Gran because how will Mum clean if there's a brat hanging around like a bad smell? So I don't eat my peas. Gran's always threatening us with whips and sticks and bogey men and I think she'll change her mind like she usually does, even though I know it's a risk.

She doesn't change her mind and straight away I know I've made a bad mistake.

When they all leave without me I cry so loud they can hear me from here to Kingdom Come, or at least at the end of the street where I can still see them from the gate. When I know they can't hear me any more I stop crying and Mum comes and says I can go to the shop and buy an ice cream. On the way to the shop I pass the school where I'm going to start prep in a few weeks. When I get back I help change sheets and take clothes out of drawers and put them back in folded then hang the mountains of sheets on the line where wind blows them into parachutes. While we wait for the washing to dry we sit on the couch and watch a movie together and Mum puts her arm around me and strokes my hair every now and then, which is better than having your skin rubbed off any day. Then we bring the clothes in and fold them, then the big white sheets sewn down the middle by Gran so they last longer, me up one end and Mum up the other, and aren't I clever because I only have to be told once how to fold.

I ask a million questions, like if you walk in a straight line over houses and across the sea and over tall buildings and backyard fences and you don't stop, will you come to the end of the earth, and why don't you say the 'h' in chemist, and where does rain come from, and what's a rainbow, and why are cars in the world different shapes because don't they all take you from one place to the other, and why are some people bigger than others because you say older people are bigger but Gran's older than you and she's shorter. Mum never tells me to stop asking so many questions or says Oh, Barbara I don't know. When the others come back they feel sorry for me that I didn't go to Luna Park but I don't care because I've got the secret of what it's like having Mum to yourself for a whole day and they wouldn't understand how it's better than Luna Park any old day. No matter how many times I go to Luna Park after that I don't think about it as much as the day I stayed home with Mum.

Now I've got Mother to myself for a few days you'd think I'd love being with her. But now she isn't Mum any more; she's Mother and everything's changed. It sounds like I don't love her now or something, and I'd like to say that's not true, but the truth is, I don't have much of a clue what love is. I think it's a teenage thing.

When I'm a little kid love is easy because you love your mum so hard it hurts.

WE WAIT FOR HOURS after school for Mum to come home from work and take it in turns to watch from the gate to see when she comes in the car, and then it's Mum's home! Mum's home! And we come racing and dancing around the car and follow it up the drive way and we're so excited when she stops to go over the driveway hump I grab onto the bumper bar so I can run with the car all the way up the drive, but the car suddenly goes really fast and drags me along until my legs are bleeding. I try not to cry but the other kids see and everyone laughs but I don't care because Mum carries me inside and says There, there, you poor baby, there, there. Leave her alone and get out of my sight you bastards or your arses'll be so black and blue you won't sit down for a week.

The next morning I'm back at the hospital again.

'How's it going Mother? What are you knitting?'

'These bloody nurses. They wake you at the crack of dawn. I don't know how they expect anyone to get better with no sleep.'

'How's your leg?' The leg is the worst damage she got from the accident. She says her ribs don't hurt so much any more.

'Oh, all right, not too bad. What did you bring?'

'Nothing, yet. I'll get some Kentucky Fried for lunch.'

'Why don't you get it now?' she asks sheepishly. 'Go on, Barb. Get a bucket.'

I walk down the road and get the bucket. It's so weird spending so much time with Mother. I want to like her, I mean love her, but I don't really know what's going on there in that black hole of a heart of mine.

When I get back she's knitting away with a cup of tea and biscuits in front of her.

She puts it aside to concentrate on the Kentucky Fried. Grease drips down her chin and she looks happy.

'Have you heard from Pommy?' I settle onto the bed again.

'Mmm,' she says. But really, I know I have to wait. She wipes her chin. The pinky's locked in.

'She's taught herself shorthand and typing. She can do 80 words a minute.'

She seems proud for a second before she hoes into another piece of chicken.

'I think Neville's a bit of a dead loss, though.' She's dry when she says that, like it's none of her business, which it isn't. She lets us live our own lives because no-one interfered much in hers.

'I could have told you that. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him.'

'Nor would I, but I think he's worse than any of us think. He's a real con artist. He lies even when there's no reason.' She stops eating and screws up her nose.

'I can see why you'd lie and cheat if there's something in it but Neville does it just for fun. Why doesn't she leave him?'

She groans.

'Oh, I don't know. She's in love with him.' And she rolls her eyes.

'Is she working?'

'No, but she's thinking about being a consultant to Myers, offering to train their floor walkers to spot shoplifters.'

'What?'

'She reckons nobody knows how to shoplift better than her and she could teach their security people a thing or two. It's a terrific idea if she can sell it to them, don't you think?'

'What if they arrest her? They have to believe she's really a shoplifter before they'd want to hire her and if they believed that it's like hiring the enemy.'

'Hmm, I guess so.'

'Anyway, good luck to her. Where's she living?'

'They're still in Homebush, I think. Neville's working but he disappears and sleeps around. She'd be better off without him, but you know Linda. You can't tell her anything.'

'Has she asked about me?'

'I can't remember. I don't think so.'

'Well, next time you talk to her say Hi from me. Has anyone else called?'

I haven't heard from any of the family for more than a year. We don't ring each other much so there's always a couple of us who drop off the map for a while before anyone knows where we are. Then they might pop up with another guy or kid in tow. Jenny's always doing that. It's a miracle someone hasn't got completely lost.

'Betty and Jenny called but neither of them can come up.'

she says. 'They're both working.'

'How long do you think you'll be here? Will you be able to walk okay when you get out?'

'The doctors say I'll have a limp but I should be okay. I might be here for another couple of months but I've got a plan when I get out.'

'And what might that be?' She'd already stopped eating and that meant it should be a grand plan.

'Well, I'm going to apply for sickness benefits in a few different names. I think I can get birth certificates pretty easy if I look up some names in old newspapers. The birth notices tell you the maiden name, the place of birth and the parents' names. I think that's all you need for a birth certificate and that's all I need to apply for the benefits. And then I can open bank accounts in different names and get the benefits paid in every fortnight.'

Mother looks happy, like she's done a good and satisfying day's work.

'What if you get caught?'

'I won't.'

'But you might.'

'Fiddlesticks. How could they catch me? For a start I'll be doing it all over the country so they won't even know who I really am or where I live.'

When we were kids, people were always ringing for Mrs Sherman or Dot or Mrs Wright. We knew it was Mother and never asked why she used different names. I did it myself when I got my first official job at the post office. I had to be older than I was so I used someone else's name. How everybody else in the world got by was a mystery to us all.

After our catch up, there isn't a lot more to say. I tell her I have to get back to Sydney to get ready for my trip but I know everything's already done. I go to the shop once more to buy her some cream caramels and then I'm off.

'Thanks for coming,' she says, as if I'm a neighbor who's dropped in for a cup of tea.

A BAD ACID TRIP



Lalith sees me off at the airport. I've never had a guy friend before. He's the first one and that's why I really love him. But I know if I didn't have the 'no sex' rule there's no way I could have Lalith for a friend. He tries to kiss me on the mouth when I leave, but I'm so surprised I pretend it didn't happen.

I go to Singapore first. It's the first Asian country I've ever been to. It smells of fish and toilets and incense, different to anywhere I've ever been. And it's hot in a way that makes you sweat all day long and half the night. I go to an outdoor market and buy a watch. It's the first time I ever bargain. Those people are so poor it makes me feel mean.

After that I go by train up through Malaysia. I get sick there and have to see a doctor. While I'm getting better, staying in a place by a lake, I write a poem and send it to Simone in Sydney who I haven't seen for a long time. I feel like she's the only one who can understand the black feelings I get. 'Hail leafy dappled water green, dark green blue blending adding each to water sky. Tree and tree on rivers edge, sombre, standing, hanging there. We wait to flake from earth water sky, never can, never will to die now'. She writes back saying she likes the poem but doesn't get it. Again. Well, I guess I don't really even get it myself, except it is how I feel. Being able to write it down makes a difference.

When I'm better again I catch another train to Bangkok. I'm using the guide book. The same one Mary and Kat took with them on their trip. It tells you everything about where to stay, what to eat, how much things cost. I'm scared about going overseas but the book tells you everything. The only thing is, it's a bit old and that's how I get into trouble.

Someone I meet in a backpacker place I read about in the book says he's just come back from teaching English in Cambodia. This guy seems to know a lot about travelling and working and making money in foreign countries and in

that way he's different to people who hang around the backpacker hostels.

'They're desperate for English teachers. Everyone says don't go 'cause of the war, y'know? But that's not why I left. I got out 'cause I'm hookin' up with a pal here. Anyways, if that don't work there's a guy I met in Phnom Penh and he says Japan's got great money for teaching English. You should try there if Phnom Penh doesn't work out.'

I'm not sure I have enough money for the whole year but I don't want to go to Japan. That's way out of my way. He does go on and on about how good the money is there but I decide Cambodia's the place for me because it's close. He says there's a bit of a war going on there but it isn't in Phnom Penh. That's the capital where he taught English.

So, I hitch-hike to the border. I don't think Thai people in the countryside have seen a white girl before. Especially not one hitching along. No-one speaks English, either, so that's awkward. But when I say Poipet, which is a town on the Cambodian border, they understand. I've looked in a guide book and it says a little bit about the country but doesn't mention anything about a war.

At Poipet I line up with everybody else to get over the border and the people on the Thai side say they aren't going to let me into Cambodia. I'm not too happy about coming all that way over two days and having to go all the way back. So I think to myself, why do I need to go through the border when I can just go down the road and walk in? It isn't as if there are fences.

So that's what I do. I'm sneaking along a narrow path between some bushes when a kid sees me and shouts. I put my finger over my mouth trying to tell him to be quiet because I'm trying to sneak across the border, but that makes him shout louder. People come from everywhere with red mouths from chewing betel nut and waving their arms around, with kids on their backs and chickens under their arms, everyone staring and shouting and laughing. I put my finger up to my mouth to say ssshhh, which surely must be a universal thing, but they only shout more and I guess that means I'm going right back to Bangkok.

But they don't take me to the Thai border office. Instead they take me to the Cambodian side. They stamp my passport and let me in. I ask if there are any buses I can take but nobody speaks English. Then a miracle happens. I see some white people with a jeep. They're French and working with the United Nations. They don't want to give me a lift but when I offer to sit on the roof, they agree but let me sit inside with them.

We head off and I'm sitting squashed in the back seat with three others. I've been more squashed in our own car with five kids in the back seat so it doesn't bother me. But for them I can see they're being very nice to let me come because they look hot and sweaty and pissed off about me being there. They say we won't arrive until it gets dark, which is hours away. It's mid-afternoon when we head off. As soon as we leave the border post the road is streaming with people going the other way. There are families and old people and pregnant women and sick people and people with no legs being pushed along by someone. And I'm not talking about in a wheelchair either. They're on a cow with horns or a wheelbarrow. I'm also not talking about a couple of people here and there. It's like a traffic jam going the other way. They have carts they pull with all their stuff on it, people carrying other people and pushing these carts with furniture tied on a mile high. And there are all kinds of animals as well. Chickens and goats, cows and horses. That's when I get a giggling feeling that where we're going is somewhere all these people don't want to be. But if you take too much notice of every giggling feeling you won't do anything.

'Where are all these people going?' I ask the guy next to me.

'They are getting out of this place because if not they might be killed. Aren't you afraid of going to Phnom Penh when there is a war going on?'

'Well, you're going,' I say. 'Aren't you afraid?'

'We are from the United Nations. They won't hurt us.'

'Well, I'm Australian. The war's got nothing to do with us. Why would they want to do anything to me?'

'Because you are there.'

We drive for hours. After dark the rivers of people going the other way dry up. We don't get to Battambang until near midnight. They drop me at a cheap hotel. I go inside and thank God someone there speaks English. It's dark because there are hardly any lights on, but I can see the people at the desk staring at me like I'm a ghost come back to life.

'How much are your rooms?'

'How long you want to stay?'

'I'm not sure. I want to go to Phnom Penh.'

'Can't go there. No way go there.'

I don't believe him. There has to be some way. It isn't the moon.

'Are there any Australians staying here? Or anyone who speaks English?' Someone who speaks English won't be staying put in this place. They'll have come from, or be going to, Phnom Penh.

'You from Ostraria? No Ostraria people stay here. Two man from USA stay here. They stay room 132. You want I show?'

'No. No, I'll see them in the morning. Will they be here in the morning? I'm really tired. I just want to go to bed.'

'Yes. They stay few day here.' He's smiling a lot but half his teeth are yellow and the other half missing. He also has one eye smaller than the other and that makes him look like he's suspicious of me. He asks one of the young boys with him to take me to my room. It's up windy staircases and passageways so that I don't have a clue where I am. If I have to get out of here in a hurry there's no way I'll find my way out.

He leaves me and I don't know why I'm scared. I don't scare easily but I get this idea they're going to come and rob and rape me in the middle of the night. I must be tired because it's like a bad acid trip. In Bangkok I hadn't even locked my door at night, but here I put my money belt under my pillow and hardly get a wink of sleep because just as I

doze off I hear people shouting in the street.

In the morning I feel silly about being so scared. The sun is shining and there are people going about their business. I'm starving and go to buy breakfast. I find a cart in the street that sells long bread rolls with crisp crust and fluffy white dough in the middle that melts in your mouth. It's the best bread roll I've ever tasted and I wonder how Cambodians can make bread better than Australians when everyone knows they eat rice all day long. You can knock me over with a feather when I hear some Cambodians speaking French. That's when I realise the French must have come and taught them how to bake bread.

Back in the hotel, I go to room 132 and knock.

There are two American guys, one about 40, the other one young and cute. The older one's staring at me like I want to sell him the Bible or ask for money. I tell them I want to go to Phnom Penh and they just laugh.

'You hear that, Ray? What you wanna go there for?'

I tell them my plan and they just look at each other. I ask what they're doing here.

Chuck lights up a cigarette and takes a big draw on it before he talks. It's like he's going to puff the whole cigarette in one go. Then he turns his head just a little to look at Ray sideways. Like asking him if he should tell me what they're really doing here.

'Well, we got a special job to do. We're pilots and we're flyin' food in there. They got no food in Phnom because all the roads are closed and there ain't no transport to get it in.'

'Well, who do you work for? Are you with the army or something? No one said anything about America being in the war.'

'She's sweet, ain't she? Don't you know anythin'? Nobody could be that dumb. What the fuck are you doin' wanderin' 'round a country by yourself when there's a mother fuckin' war goin' on? You crazy or somethin', gal? There ain't no way to get there.'

'I'll hitch then.'

'I told you, there ain't no transport. The Khmer Rouge got the whole place surrounded. Can you believe this chick, Ray?'

He doesn't give Ray time to answer or say anything much at all.

'Well, I'll walk then. It can't be that far.'

'Ooh, that's rich. That's rich, that is. Did you hear that, Ray? She's going to walk to fuckin' Phnom Penh.'

They both laugh until tears fill their eyes. That's when I know I really am going to walk there.

I realise I'm not going to get too far with these guys, so I decide to leave. I get up.

'Hang on a Goddam minute. Just you hang on there. If you're so damn stubborn about it, we're goin' to Phnom Penh in a day or two. Maybe we can give you a lift. What about it Ray? You reckon we can give this dumb broad a lift?'

'Don't see why not.'

'Well, who do you work for?' I say. 'Who's side are you on?'

'Well, the thing is we're what you call mercenaries. You know what they are?'

'No.'

'We're pilots and we get paid to fly food in there. We ain't on no one's side. You show us the greenbacks and we fly anywhere. Hell, I risked my life in 'Nam and it wasn't nothin' to do with America, so I figure we can do it here and at least get rich. Right Ray?'

'So, when are you leaving?'

That day we go to the market and they show me how the locals sell sacks, and I mean sacks, of marijuana, right there next to the rice and beans and everything else. The guys smoke dope every day and so do I. That makes us get the munchies and every night we go out and spend hours in a restaurant. We go to the same one by the river where there's always the smell of fresh fish cooking, which is what we eat with piles of rice, except when we eat hamburgers which the cook has learned how to make, because the only people who have any money are Americans, so you might as well find out what they like so you get their American dollars instead of someone else.

Chuck and Ray are very generous because they never let me pay for anything. I can't believe that guys can be that nice to you when you aren't even sleeping with them. The Chief's the only guy I can remember ever buying me a meal. I think these guys must like me a lot.

I find out there's a whole bunch of mercenaries here. They're all mates. All American. All of them except Chuck have Cambodian girlfriends that wash their clothes for them and even feed them! Literally, they feed them at the table. Ray has a pretty girl that he seems to be in love with. She washes his clothes and gives him massages and even puts his shoes on for him. I can't believe it but don't say anything. They're being so nice I'm hardly going to tell them about feminism.

The three of us go everywhere together. Then Chuck gets a girl to do his clothes washing and cleaning but he doesn't sleep with her because she has a squashed-in face and is short and plump.

Because he doesn't have a girlfriend he tries to kiss me but I'm still on my no sex thing and say no. I think they might turf me out and say I can't come with them. They don't, though. It makes me like them more, even though they are letting these girls be their slaves.

'I know how it looks to a western gal seeing these Asian chicks wait on us hand and foot,' Ray says to me one day.

'But you have to see it from their point of view. We give them money that they send to their families and without that, they'd probably be prostitutes on the street.'

'Why don't they just get jobs?'

He laughs. 'You break me up. You really do. There ain't no jobs. There's a war on.'

Most of the girls who hang around with the pilots can speak English. Otherwise they couldn't talk to their boyfriends because I never hear any of the pilots try to talk to them in their own language. I get friendly with the girl with the squashed face. Her name is Rose and she tells me her dad is dead and she has six brothers and sisters at home who are younger than her. She's 20. She sends money to them far away in the north.

One day we're sitting in a restaurant by the river having breakfast and a local guy comes and tells Chuck and Ray they can leave today. It isn't the first time it happens, so no one's sure we really are going.

'Believe it when we're in the air,' Chuck says.

But by lunchtime, we are in the air. The guys are flying up front with wooden crates of pigs shitting and squealing behind them. In the back there are about fifteen people in makeshift seats, including Rose, Ray's girlfriend and me.

After half an hour a local boy comes down from the front and tells me to follow him. He takes me right up to the cockpit.

'When we land, no matter what's happening, just put your head down and run. Doesn't matter what you hear, doesn't matter who falls down next to you, just run. You hear?'

'What do you mean? No matter who falls down next to me?'

'Look, the Khmer Rouge don't want this food to get in. The city's under siege. They're targeting the airport. You never know when it's gonna happen. We might get there and there'll be nothin' goin' on. But we might get there and there'll be shells comin' from every damn place. It don't matter. You just run, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Don't you forget now.'

I think Chuck sees himself in the movies, a hotshot maverick who likes to play cowboys and Indians. So I don't really take too much notice of what he says but, just in case, I think it won't hurt to play it safe.

When we get there everybody starts running towards the airport building and I follow because I don't want to be left, the only one straggling behind for the mortar shells to hit. There isn't anything going on and I can't hear anything, but I run anyway.

While we were waiting to leave Battambang, the guys told me about the three-storey French mansion they have in Phnom Penh with their guards and cook and cleaner and washing lady. I didn't know whether to believe them because they like to big note themselves. Not Ray so much, but Chuck. But when we get there, it's all like they said.

The first morning we have hotcakes for breakfast.

'I had to teach her how to make 'em. They don't know shit about hotcakes,' Chuck says.

After breakfast, he gives me another lecture. Sounds like John Wayne again to me.

'Now, you can go into town but this city's gonna fall any time now. Could be tomorrow, could be next week or next month, but when it happens, it'll be sudden. Now, if you ain't here and we gotta leave in a hurry, we're just goin' without ya. You hear. We ain't waitin' 'round for nobody. And I mean fuckin' nobody.'

That day his driver takes me and the girls to town. Rose takes me to a friend of hers to have a manicure even though I'm not specially keen. I've never had a manicure before. The girls in the salon are so elegant in delicate high-heels and silk dresses that show off their tiny figures and I have on my flat old brown sandals and a loose hippie dress. I can tell they think it isn't fair that this scummy looking hippie has the American dollars and doesn't even know what to do with them. I'd never have come if Rose hadn't pestered me to because what use does a backpacker have for painted nails, but it's luxurious having someone pay such close attention to my hands.

When I get home Chuck hits on me again. He tries to kiss me and I say no. It's awkward because they've been so nice. He doesn't seem any more pissed off than the last time, but boy am I wrong about that. In the morning after breakfast he takes me into another room all by myself. He doesn't look too happy.

'Listen, you're gonna have to go. I don't know why we got mixed up with you in the first place. I guess we felt sorry for you. But now it's time to go. Okay? The girls'll take you to a hotel in town. You'll be fine.'

I can feel my lips start to tremble but I try not to cry while he's there. After he leaves I go to my room — they even give me my own room — and bawl my eyes out. I don't think about how I haven't cried for more than a year. I forget to say no, I'm just not going to. I thought Chuck liked me. I thought we were mates.

He gets the driver to take me and Rose to a hotel and we both book in there. Rose has to go too so we're together at least.

The next day I feel terrible and cry all day. Once I start crying again it's like I've stored up all the tears I haven't cried in the last year and they tumble out all over the place. There seems no end to it. Every time anyone looks at me I cry and can't stop. It's like a bloody tap. What I sometimes do when I'm depressed is, I think about my pimples. I can't pay someone to pop them because I don't know if people do that kind of thing here. I can fast but in the heat I'd collapse, lying in the sun is only okay if there's a beach but Phnom Penh is a long way from any beach. So this time I ask Rose to find me a doctor who speaks English so I can get some antibiotics. She gets me the name of a doctor in a big hospital and I take a rickshaw there.

When I go inside I have to go look for him and what I see in there shocks the life out of me. I know there's a war going on, but everything in the streets is so normal, like Bangkok. There are no soldiers anywhere, no shooting, shops are open, people going to work. It doesn't look like there's a war going on. But when I go inside the hospital it hits me.

As I walk around the outside of one sprawling ward, there are people lying on the floor because there aren't enough beds. Some have their faces blown off, blood is dripping from the bandages, some people have rags wrapped around a stump. I'm walking along trying to find this English-speaking doctor to clear up my pimples and there are people looking up at me like they expect me to help them. Me. There are little kids and babies and pregnant women and old people. Someone tells me a bomb went off in a market this morning.

I'm walking around and my face is drenched, even though I'm not exactly sobbing because there's no sound, but the tears won't stop. A nurse comes up and asks me what I want. I show her the bit of paper with the doctor's name on it and she points up the stairs. I go to the top but can't go in. I'm hot and realise I'm ashamed. I come down the stairs and take a rickshaw back to the hotel.

I don't worry about my pimples after that.

That's when I know there really is a war going on and a war is a serious thing that you don't want to be in the middle of. When you've never had a war in your country you don't even think about what it's like until you find mangled bodies on a floor covered in dried blood and people moaning and asking you with their eyes to help them, even though you know you can't even take care of yourself. Suddenly I want to get out of here and go back to Thailand.

That's when I find out the only planes flying in and out are ones like Chuck's, and army ones. I tell Rose I want to leave.

'Why you not try airport. Maybe you find man like Chuck. He take you Bangkok.'

I get a taxi there and meet lots of pilots but they're going the other way to Saigon. One guy tells his driver to take me to his house and let me stay there. He's about to fly to Saigon and says he'll be back in four days. He tells his driver to take me to the Australian embassy so they can help me get out.

His house is in the middle of a field, not in a built up area like Chuck's house. There's a houseboy who's cute and much younger than me.

'You want smoke marijuana?' That's almost the first thing he says.

'Maybe tonight. I'm tired now. Okay?' Actually, I think it might help me sleep.

When the night comes he gives me the smoke. I've never been more stoned in my life. It's like acid. I lie on the bed and imagine the houseboy coming to rape me. He puts his head in the door and asks if I'm hungry, but I can't speak. After a few hours of imagining being ravished by the tiny, sweet houseboy, I fall asleep.

I wake up because of the bombs. They're probably mortars but they sound like atom bombs dropping outside my bedroom window. They go on and on and sound closer with each one. I think about getting under the bed in case one drops on the house, but it seems cowardly. Not a good look if the houseboy comes back in. After another half hour I'm so terrified I do get under the bed — on the side furthest away from the door in case the houseboy comes back. If he doesn't see me, maybe he'll think I've gone out.

In the morning I want to go home even more. That's when I discover that things are so bad that the Australian embassy has gone. It's too dangerous for the staff. That's what they tell me at the American embassy, which is where I go next. They almost don't let me in because I'm not American. When I tell them my own embassy has gone they let me in.

I wait two hours and then see some colonel or general with lots of striped pads on his shoulder. His uniform has shiny buttons and his face is hard as rock.

'If you're stupid enough to come here when there's a war going on you can find your own way home. Why did you come in the first place?'

I have to think fast, but I'm desperate.

'My sister came to teach English two months ago and nobody's heard from her since. I came to find her. Nobody's seen or heard from her. I've spent weeks looking and now I'm terrified. I just want to go home.'

'There's a lot of people who want to get out of here. You're not an American citizen so I'm afraid I can't help you.' And he stands up like I'm dismissed.

But I don't give up that easy. I stand up.

'What does it matter if I'm American or Australian or Cambodian or anything else. I'm a person. And I'm terrified and want to go home.' I start sobbing. I'm not faking.

He looks at me sobbing away and hands me a hanky while he looks at the wall.

'Wait outside.'

Surely if he isn't going to help he would've told me to go. But I'm not sure until a woman comes and gives me a piece of paper with a flight number on it and tells me to turn up at 10.45 the next morning at the airport.

'If you're late the plane won't wait, so make sure you're there on time.'

Next morning is the first time I've arrived anywhere early. I'm not risking missing that plane for all the tea in China. When the plane takes off I thank God for America.

When I get back to Bangkok I can't stop crying. I try to go to India but change my flight and miss the plane. 'No miss, not bus to airport, take other bus. No miss, wrong bus. Airport that way.' In four hours I don't even see the airport. I decide missing the plane is a sign. The sign is that I'm supposed to go home. I've been away three months.

Weeks later, back home in Oz, I see on the news pictures of Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge take over that make me feel even more small and stupid than usual. There are people so desperate to get out they're hiding in propeller shafts and getting chopped up. They're hanging onto the wheels under planes and falling off or hiding in cargo holds and freezing to death. They're killing each other to get on those planes. I realise there really is a war on.

ELEVEN

WATCHING A MOVIE

'confronting, distressing AND funny ...'

IN
MORAL
DANGER

A True Story



BARBARA BIGGS

When I get back from overseas, I ring my old high school friend from Melbourne, Jacqui. She's my only friend from school. When you change schools a lot you don't count on seeing kids again. What's the point? But Jacqui's different. We've been writing to each other since I left the psych hospital. We met in my first year at high school. Mother had just bought her first house. It was in Croydon, a long way out of the city, not like the other places we'd lived before. There were more trees around and the houses and back yards seemed huge.

I didn't know how to make friends at school. But Jacqui liked me straight away. She used to walk over to my house every Saturday morning. Walk! I hated walking. And her house was so far away. She lived at one end of Croydon and I lived at the other. But she wanted to see me so much she didn't mind. Sometimes her family went mushroom picking and she'd bring some with her and make me mushrooms on toast for breakfast. On weekends I'd go and stay with her. On Friday nights we'd pile blankets on the couch, fill hot water bottles and watch the all-night movie marathon and stuff ourselves with coke, sausage rolls and party pies. A couple of times she gave me a massage. We talked about our families and kids at school and what was happening to our bodies.

She'd written to me when the family moved to Queensland, saying how we were soul mates. There was only one time when I didn't see or hear from Jacqui for a long time.

The only other person I know in Melbourne, apart from Gran and the Chief, is Jacqui. She might as well live on the moon. I have Sundays off so once I go to her house on Saturday night. We stay up all night like we used to. We tell jokes and watch movies until the sun comes up just like we did when we were at school. In the morning I go shopping with her, her mum and dad and brother Shane and sister Vicki, everyone laughing and joking with each other. We cook lunch together when we get back. But everything's changed now. I'm different from them; it's like watching a movie and not really being there. I never want to go back.

The next time I invite Jacqui to the Chief's for the night. I should've known better. He knew she was coming and got some blue movies. In one there's a donkey, in another a few people are doing things to each other. All kinds of things. I'm not expecting it so I don't know what to say to Jacqui. She's really good about it and after a couple says she wants to go to bed and I say I'm tired too, but the Chief says Oh, you don't really want to do that. You're not going to leave me here all by myself? Come on, you're not going to be bad sports are you? So we have to stay up all night watching these movies with him. At least he doesn't touch me or Jacqui that night. I think it's because he's always so careful about witnesses because he's a barrister. I still don't understand why it's okay for Jacqui to witness the way he plays with his dick. It's very gross. He isn't the least bit embarrassed. He doesn't leave it alone even though it's so red and swollen I wonder how he can keep on with it and why he wants to.

Anyway, good old Jacqui doesn't give me a hard time about any of it but she doesn't ring me again after that. I'm glad because I don't want to see her either.

After I left the Chief's place in Melbourne all those years ago, it took us a year to start writing again. In her last letter before I left for OS, she wrote and said when I come back 'I will still be here. Our friendship has been pre-ordained. "And God said to the angels, these two are made totally different, incompatible, so we will make them inseparable friends." And so, that's what happened, we became soul sisters.'

It's great that Jac is so loyal but the depths of her feelings for me are a mystery. It's like we're from different planets. I don't feel like that about anyone. She must be more noble than me. Either that or that's the way ordinary people are who don't move around so much. I wonder if I have something missing inside me.

When I get back from OS there's another letter from Jac waiting for me in Sydney. She's invited me to come and stay at her place in Melbourne. She still lives at home. She's got bunk beds in her room. She's doing an arts course in graphic design.

I've deferred my course so I have to get a job while I wait for uni to start in Sydney next year. Jacqui's mum says I should try some kind of different work than being a barmaid and I think what the hell, why not? I remember back to when I was the best at selling all those Jaycee books. Maybe I'd make a good sales person. So, I look in the newspaper and find a job for a real estate agent.

That's how I meet Steve and start having sex again.

My job is to sell blocks of land on new estates on the outskirts of Melbourne. It's a funny kind of job because you don't get paid unless you sell something. I also have to buy a car from my India money to drive all the way from one side of Melbourne to the other during the week and on weekends. That's when buyers are looking at blocks of land. I work there for six months but I never sell a single block. I come close a few times. Really close. I spend a lot of time thinking about why people buy blocks of land from everybody else in the office but not from me. It costs me so much in petrol money that in the end they start giving me a few dollars for a fuel allowance.

That's when the boss, who has the hairiest hands you've ever seen and even springy coils sticking out of his shirt, starts calling me into his office to give me pep talks or tell me how hopeless I am.

'You've been here four months and you haven't made a single sale. If you keep going on like this we'll have to let you go.' You'd think I was costing him a fortune the way he carried on. The thing is, I'm very determined to sell a block of land and when I get determined there's practically nothing I won't do.

Worse than not making any money is that something starts happening to me that makes me think I'm going crazy. I think I'll be like it for life. It starts one day when I'm with a woman in the office. She's got long shiny blonde hair and her clothes are perfect. She even paints her nails with clear nail polish. I can't see why anybody would bother but it works for her because she sells more land in the office than anyone else.

'The tiniest things matter with clients. Their impression of you is everything. If your hair's dirty or you've got old nail polish on or if your shoes are scuffed it creates an impression. If you look like success, people will want to buy from you.' She talks to me even though most of the people don't because if you talk to someone who doesn't sell anything the boss thinks it rubs off.

'Well, what am I doing wrong?' I ask.

She looks me up and down. I don't know what she's thinking but my first thought is that there are so many things she

doesn't know where to begin.

'Look, your car doesn't help.' I had bought a tiny little Honda Civic. She has a new Saab.

'Well, I haven't got any money for a better one.'

She shrugs. Then I look at my shoes and they're scuffed. My nails are bitten down, too.

She seems so mature. I want to be like her but she might as well be from Mars. I'd lied about my age to get the job. I'm eighteen but said I was 21. Everyone else there is in their early 20s or older. I feel like an imposter. It gets so that if someone asks me a question, I go red and can't talk. I'm embarrassed, not about anything in particular, just about being alive.

It starts one day when there are four of us in the office waiting for a big razz up from the boss. The others are talking about their sales and how much they've made and I'm sitting near the window in this tiny office. There's hardly enough room for us all. Then someone asks me a question. That's when it happens.

'Barbara, how did you go this month? Any better?'

That's all she says. It isn't a kick out of left field or anything, but I can't talk. I get so hot it feels like my face is on fire. I can't look at her. I stare at the floor but I can feel her eyes on me. The more she looks, the hotter I get until I feel like exploding, splat, all over the walls. So I turn and look out the window. Then she asks me again and still no words come. Now they're all looking at me. I wish everybody would keep talking and ignore me. Then the boss comes in and I'm saved.

The blushing starts when I'm talking to prospective buyers, too. Any time someone asks something I don't know, it happens. But sometimes it happens for no reason at all. Like, when I think someone might be thinking I'm a fuckwit. Once it happens when I'm sitting in the back seat of a two-door car and I can't get out. The driver, who I'm about to sell a block of land to, I really am, turns around and asks me in a pinched little voice why I've shown him a block an hour from town when he said he didn't like rural living. Until now I really thought this was going to be my first sale.

The only good thing that happens is meeting Steve. I'm on a new housing estate way out in the sticks when I meet two guys. One's a really handsome Indian guy and the other isn't too bad looking either. He's a white guy with an accent. It's Steve. His parents are Russian. The other guy is his friend, Naj.

They pretend to be customers and say they want to buy a block of land. That goes on for ages, then, just when I think I'm going to make my first sale, they tell me it's all a joke and Naj is selling land on the same estate for another agent. We laugh and bitch about how there've been people just driving around looking all day.

After that Steve and I become like twins. Sometimes he takes me scuba diving during the week when I take a day off for working weekends. He finds me a wetsuit from one of his cousins and teaches me how to dive. Other times he takes me on his motor bike all around the Dandenongs and drives so fast around the hairpin bends my toes curl up in case my foot scrapes the ground. He even takes me in the middle of winter when we have to wear six layers of clothes and leather coats and gloves and two balaclavas. He's a wild driver. Sometimes he runs red lights and nearly kills us. Once he counts ten seconds after the light changes to red but he says he knows that intersection and it has a long delay. I nearly wet my pants.

Mostly when we see each other, I drive from Croydon all the way to the other side of Melbourne, to Altona, where he lives with his Russian family. They're a very funny family. Except for Steve, who's an ordinary six feet, they're a family of giants. They sit around a gigantic table in a big dirty-looking building out in the backyard of their house and tear off great big chunks of bread and throw on some great big hunks of meat and they have huge bins of pickled cabbage lying around the kitchen. There are heaps of them. Huge brothers with shoulders that nearly touch the door frames when they come in and one short, pretty little sister who didn't miss out on the pushy manner even though she is small. Sometimes I stay overnight if Steve and I are going scuba diving early in the morning. Steve sleeps in a little single bed and I sleep in one on the other side of the room.

Once we go to the Salesian Brothers in Sunbury to get Mick and Peter and take them diving too. It's one of the only times I've ever visited them there. As far as I'm concerned they might as well be on another planet. It was Steve's idea. He knows what family is and I like that.

The more I see him, the more I like Steve, but I'm still not having sex. I tell him I'm celibate. That's the proper word for not having sex. He accepts it and never even tries to kiss me. But sometimes when we stand near each other I hope he'll accidentally touch me, but he never does.

Once when I'm staying at his place, I can't sleep all night because I keep imagining him coming to my bed. In bad novels they say the air is thick with desire. They say that for a good reason. It's the best way to describe air that's thick with desire. It drips and has fingers that almost touch you. It's tangible. It can't just be in my head, I think. But what if I'm wrong about him? What if the air is only thick with my desire? I can see light in the sky by the time I finally find the courage to go to his bed. I tap him on the shoulder.

'Is it okay if I get in with you?'

He turns over and has a big shy smile on his face.

'I can't tell you how many times I've laid awake at night hoping you'd ask me that.'

The sex is okay and our feelings are strong. All that desire saturating the air, night after night.

He becomes my boyfriend after that and I practically live at his house for the next couple of months. His dad thinks I'm a charming idiot because I talk about communism as if it's the second coming. He's lived under it and laughs at my naivete trying to explain how wrong I am.

Sometimes when Steve and I have sex I cry. I don't know why. It's usually when he's being nice. He asks what's up but I don't know.

One day a phone call comes.

‘Barb, it’s Pommy.’

‘Hi! Where are you? How’re things!’ I’m so happy because Pommy and I have barely seen each other since we had that fight two years ago. I’ve missed her. But she isn’t calling me for a chat.

‘I’m in Surfers Paradise and Neville’s gone and left me, the bastard.’ She starts crying. I hate it when she cries because she hardly ever does.

‘There’s no food in the house, there’s no money. We owe six weeks rent on the flat and they’re trying to kick us out. I’m just so depressed I want to die. Will you come and visit? Just for a little while?’

‘Well, I’ve kind of got this job and this guy that I really like. I’d send you some money if I had any but I’m not really getting paid. Where’s Neville? Is he coming back?’

‘Fucked if I know. He’s in Brisbane somewhere. He’s just such a fucking liar. And he’s so good at it. I believe him because I want to believe he loves me. He says he does but how could someone treat you like that and lie all the time if they loved you? Every time he ends up fucking with me. I wish I didn’t love him so much so that I could hate him as much as he deserves. Instead I just end up hating myself. I want to die. If you knew how unhappy I was, you’d come. But anyway, if you don’t, I’m just going to kill myself anyway, so I don’t s’pose it really matters. It’s Christian I’m really worried about.’

I’ve never heard her so upset. Isn’t she supposed to be the together one?

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I’ll be there in a couple of days.’

I tell Steve what’s happening and resign from my job.

‘You’re so close to a sale. I can feel it. But if we have to let you go, all I can say is, I don’t think selling’s in your blood. No-one can say you didn’t try, but sometimes you gotta know when to give up. You’re one stubborn girl. Let us know when you become Prime Minister. Ha ha.’

Steve’s good with cars and spends a whole day on the crappy little old Honda Civic. He practically takes that engine apart so I won’t break down on the way up.

‘It’s nearly 2000 kilometres, isn’t it? It’s a bloody long way for a tiny engine like this. I don’t want my girl breaking down on the way.’

He’s sweet. I’m not desperately in love but it feels good and relaxed between us. I’m sad to leave but there’s no wrenching. I have to go to uni the next year, so it’s never going to last anyway.

I call Pommy every day to see how she is and tell her I’m on my way.

I get there in the middle of the afternoon. I knock at the door of the flat and Pommy answers. I can see she’s just woken up because her hair’s everywhere and she’s wearing a dirty, white dressing gown. She hugs me. Very strange.

‘Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it.’ She bursts out crying again. Christian’s watching television and he comes and puts his arms out to her and she picks him up.

‘It’s all right, darling. Mummy’s all right.’ And she cries all over his head until he starts crying too.

The flat’s a mess. There are dirty dishes everywhere and Christian isn’t too clean, either. We have a cup of tea and she tells me about the lies Neville’s told her. I wish she wasn’t still in love with him. What a creep.

I go shopping for food. The next day I take Christian to the beach where he nearly drowns in three inches of surf. Then, that night, that’s when Pommy sits me down to explain why I’m here.

‘I’m going to kill myself. I’ve got the pills. And don’t try to stop me because it’s my decision. I’m an adult and I have a right to do whatever I want. It’s my life. All I want you to do is take care of Christian when I’m dead. You don’t have to help me do it but I don’t want Christian waking up in the morning and finding his mummy dead.’

‘You mean I’m just s’posed to sit around while you take an overdose and wait for you to die, pack your body off somewhere and tell Christian he has to live with me from now on? That sounds like a good plan.’

‘Well, you don’t have to sit by if you don’t want to. You can go out and come back in the morning. But I wouldn’t mind the company while I drop off.’

‘When are you planning on doing it?’

‘Tonight, if that’s okay with you.’

I tell her there’s no ideal time to sit around and watch your sister die, but I can see she isn’t going to back down no matter what I say or do. She’s more stubborn than me when she’s made up her mind. She’s an adult and haven’t I made the same decision myself enough times? What right do I have now to tell her what to do? If she’s going to do it whether I’m here or not, the least I can do is make her last night on earth comfy.

We cook some spaghetti Bolognese and eat it. She baths Christian and cries over his head again while she reads him a bedtime story. Then she takes her pills and sits in the big armchair. We play a few games of backgammon. She talks to me about what she wants for Christian.

‘He’ll be sad at first because he’ll really miss me but he’s better off with anyone other than me. I’m just so unhappy I’m no use to anyone. And don’t hit him. He’s not used to it. Oh, and make sure if you have a boyfriend he doesn’t lay a hand on him, either. You should be able to get the pension if you’re his carer.’

We open a block of Cadbury’s dairy milk chocolate and laugh about some of the good times we had as kids.

‘Remember when you put Mick in the window of the empty shop downstairs in the High Street house and we

pretended he was a shop dummy? You made him stay there for hours. Remember that?’ I say.

But you’re the one who told Mother he was naked and got us into trouble.’

‘He was blue by the time Gran came!’

‘I can’t believe no-one driving past even noticed he was real.’

‘And what about when we were coming home from playing in the drains down by the creek and you got in the front door before me and locked me out and I cried and banged until it got dark even though I could’ve easily gone around the back.’

‘I never got why you did that.’

I can’t tell her even now it’s because we had the best day and she was so proud of me because I’d crawled up a dark narrow drain to see where it led and it came out in the gutter of High Street with all the cars whizzing past. I couldn’t believe after I’d been so brave she’d locked me out because why should someone who was every bit as brave as her have to come in the back door when all the other kids had gone in the front door.

‘What about Val? Do you ever think about him?’

‘If you only knew how much. If I hadn’t been put in the convent I’d probably have married him instead of falling for that bastard Neville.’ She’s talking slowly and her eyes start blinking like they have lead weights in them.

‘Why did you fall for Neville? Anyone could’ve told you he was a no hoper.’

‘I was just so lonely, I guess. And he was the first guy who came along and showed any interest. You’ve got no idea how lonely it was in that bloody convent.’

‘I was there too, remember. At least the girls liked you. By the time I left hardly anyone’d even talk to me.’

She’s slumping further down in her chair and every minute it seems harder for her to keep her eyes open.

‘Have you ever thought about looking him up?’

‘What? Who? Looking who up?’

‘Val.’

But she can only mumble.

In a minute she’s asleep with her head on her chest.

I sit there watching a movie. I keep looking over to see how she’s going. She looks uncomfortable with her neck bent at such an awkward angle but I can’t think of anything to do other than putting her to bed, and she’s too heavy for that. She’s put on weight since I last saw her. She’s the prettiest of us four girls but with her head slumped like that you can’t see her big blue eyes and her full lips are drooling, so with that and the pasty color of her skin, she doesn’t look her best. When I think about how rape is the first thing Jenny and I both know about sex, how lucky Pommy is to have had Val. And how stupid everybody was to stop her from seeing him when he’d been the best thing that happened to her, and look now how she’d ended up because Mother got all high and mighty about a nice boy she’d met in high school when a year later I’m living with the Chief. How are you supposed to make sense of that?

I start thinking about how I’m going to bring up Christian and if he’ll hate me because his mum’s dead. I can’t remember much of the movie.

Hours later I hear some noises coming from the chair and look over. Pommy’s vomited over the front of herself. I don’t know what to do. I try to wake her but can’t.

You can’t leave your sister with vomit sitting all over her front whether she’s going to die or not. So I run a bath. I don’t know how I manage to get her into it because Pommy’s bigger than me. Lifting a dead weight is one of the hardest things you can do, I find out. Everything flops about. Just when you think you’ve got something under control, some other arm or leg gets stuck in a doorway. The only reason I manage to get her in there is because she isn’t completely unconscious. Once I get her in the bath she wakes up a bit more.

‘I’m not dead, am I?’ She’s slurring and barely conscious.

‘Doesn’t look like it.’

‘I want to die. I want to die. Why is it so hard to die?’ Well, I know exactly where she’s coming from there. I could’ve told her it’s not the piece of cake she thought it was going to be. If there was a course in how to botch killing yourself, I could teach it no worries.

I manage to get her out and into some pyjamas and put her into bed. An hour later she vomits again on the clean sheets. I don’t bath her again, just clean her up and change the sheets.

It’s dawn when I go to bed. I know she must’ve vomited up the pills and I know she isn’t going to die. I’m glad she’s still alive but now I have to think what to do. Before I go to sleep, I decide I’m going to make her go into a psychiatric hospital. She needs help and it had helped me. Sort of.

That’s what I say to her in the morning.

‘Most people think psychiatrists are just if you’re crazy, but they actually talk to you about things and help you work out what’s going on so you feel better.’

‘I’m not going. I just want to die. I’m not having someone who doesn’t even know me going around telling me what’s wrong with my life. I already know what’s wrong.’

‘They don’t do that. It’s not what they’re like at all. And anyway, I’m not hanging around while you try again. If you

want me to look after Christian you have to at least try a psych hospital for a few weeks. Even one. After that you can do what you like.'

'I'll see someone once. If I don't like them, I won't go back. If they're okay I'll do a week. But only if I don't hate them.'

I agree and she starts seeing a shrink.

In the meantime, Jacqui's been ringing every day. She finished her course just that week and says she wants to come up and help. I say Yes straight away.

Jacqui's like fresh water from a spring, or at least, a strong coffee after a night out. She's got a way of seeing the funny side of things. She gives you a jolt. We have to get out of the flat because the real estate agent's harassing us with eviction notices. We pack as much of Pommy's stuff as we can into every crevice of the Honda Civic that isn't needed for a body. The four of us squeeze in with clothes and boxes and toys on every side and right up to the roof. We have garbage bags of clothes stuffed under our feet, dishes and cutlery clattering around the dashboard and Sesame Street toys and odd shoes dancing around our shoulders. We look like one of those cartoon cars, about to explode, setting off on holiday. Jacqui starts laughing at how ridiculous we are and then we all start and can't stop. We're driving along almost wetting our pants.

Pommy's been renewed since Jacqui arrived. She didn't like her psychiatrist much and said she'd rather go to Canberra and stay with Mother and Betty than hang around up there on her own.

On the way south, not far down the coast, we're driving along when all of a sudden we hear and feel a thud. On the passenger side of the car we see one of the wheels of the car rolling along all by itself across a paddock. The left front wheel has come off and we're skidding down the road on the axle. Jacqui starts laughing again and she sets us all off. It takes half an hour before we settle down enough to get help.

We have the car towed to a service station and hitch to Sydney. All four of us. I decide to stay there because I'm supposed to start uni in a few months. Jacqui goes on with Pommy to Canberra. I'm glad. It means I don't have to worry about Pommy any more and they really seem to like each other. Jacqui makes Pommy laugh and I figure that's better than a psychiatrist any day.

Sydney ... the first time I was here I went with the Chief and the girls.

We're going on a trip to visit the Chief's parents.

Sydney! I've never been there before. The kids are jumping with excitement. Me too. I pack for me and them. I've got the best clothes. I got them 'shopping'. I've got this really cool yellow playsuit I wear all the time, and lots of great mini-skirts and halter neck tops. I've even got some black vinyl hotpants with a bib and long black vinyl boots to go out at night.

And then he brings home a nurse's uniform for me and tells me to pack that too.

'If you wear this they'll think you're a professional nanny. I'll tell mum you're sixteen as well. First impressions are everything. When they see you in this it'll never cross their minds what a bad girl you really are will it, Pet?' He winks at me.

When we leave, I sit in the front seat of the car with the Chief and the girls sit in the back. Just like a real family. The Chief says we'll take a couple of days to do the trip so the girls won't get too 'fractious'.

The kids are so happy because they haven't seen their Nana and Pop for ages. I'm on cloud nine. A whole week with just the Chief and me and the girls.

'Will they get us presents, Mummy Barb? They prob'ly will 'cause we haven't seen them for a long time, have we, Nita? Daddy said we haven't seen them since we were little, didn't you, Daddy? And we're big girls now, aren't we?' says Kate.

For a two-year-old, Kate always has a lot to say. Mum always told me I asked a million questions from the time I began to talk. Just like Kate.

'Yes darling, you're both big girls and you're going to be good for daddy and Mummy Barb on the trip aren't you? Because it's a very long way. But you're such big girls I know you'll be very good,' says the Chief.

We plan to stop at Albury-Wodonga and stay in a motel. There's a swimming pool there and it's hot. After lunch the girls have their afternoon nap; Kate on the floor at my feet and Nita on the back seat.

The Chief and I talk. Our talks are like a secret just between us. He tells me he's met a barmaid at a hotel where he drinks near Owen Dixon Chambers where he works.

'She's just a tart but she thinks if she plays her cards right she might land a barrister,' he laughs. 'Imagine someone like that! She lives in the western suburbs somewhere near Broadmeadows.' I don't know Broadmeadows but it sounds like a poor place. 'Fancy her thinking she could marry a barrister?' He laughs again until his eyes water.

I wonder about that. He says he's a communist and isn't everyone supposed to be equal? Maybe he means something else and I don't understand. Anyway, I'm happy that he really doesn't seem to like her much and I bet he doesn't talk about me to her like that. He calls me his confidante.

'See all those truckies going past?' he asks after a while. 'I bet they're wondering what an old fart like me is doing with a gorgeous young thing like you. I bet they're trying to look at your little titties from up there in the cabs.'

He smiles at me in a way I never like.

'Why don't we really give them something to look at?' He looks to make sure the girls are fast asleep. 'Take your top off, Pet. Let's really give them something to think about.'

He changes so quickly from us being confidants to him wanting other men to see me like that. Why? It's like my dreams when I'm a kid about being Pommy's puppet. I can't say no. After I take the top of my playsuit down he laughs harder.

'Look, they can't believe their eyes. They only see those firm little titties of yours in a flash. I bet it gives them a hard on just thinking about you. In fact I've got a hard on just thinking about them thinking about you.' He reaches down to unzip his pants and puts my hand on him. His eyes roll up for a second into his head.

I don't know what to say. I do everything he asks. I know it won't last long because he'll be too worried about the girls waking up.

After he comes, he tells me to get some sleep. I pretend to sleep because I don't want to talk or look at him just then. Closing my eyes, I put my head back and think. How can he want other men to see me like that? What makes the barmaid a tart? Am I a tart? Is a tart anyone who has sex when they aren't married? I realise I don't know anything. Sometimes I try so hard trying to work things out I get a headache.

The girls wake up and we stop to go swimming at the local baths. We book into a motel first. We have two rooms, me and the girls in one and the Chief in another. That way I can sneak in after the girls fall asleep. I've never seen a motel room before. I love the little packets of tea and coffee and the telly in front of the bed.

We go to the pool and put our things near the wading pool. The Chief doesn't swim much. He lies on a towel sun baking. After the girls and I play chasey in the water, I come to sit next to the Chief. I'm watching people dive from the high board. I learned to dive at school. It's mainly guys diving from the highest one and they're doing somersaults.

'He's got the biggest bulge in his pants hasn't he? You can't take your eyes off it can you, Pet? I bet it makes you horny as hell.'

'No, I'm just watching him dive.' I feel this heavy weight on me. Sometimes I think he doesn't know me at all. I want to tell him again I'm not thinking that but I don't get a chance.

'Oh, come on, I can see the look on your face. You're thinking about how big his cock is, aren't you? It's a big bulge. Huge. You like them well hung. It makes you horny doesn't it, Pet?'

I smile because I don't know what to say. I can't imagine him saying things like that to Nita and Kate when they grow up. I'm not the least bit horny. One part of me is embarrassed that he thinks I'm horny all the time; embarrassed for him that he can be so wrong. I go along with what he's saying because I'm trying to work out what adults are supposed to feel in this kind of situation. Part of me wants to be grown up and work it out, but another part of me wants to be like everybody else at the pool, just having fun.

'That's what I like about you, Pet. Even though you're young you know what life's about. You've got to get as much sex as you can while you can. Most people don't know that but you do, don't you? You horny little devil.'

Does that mean he thinks I'm mature?

'Most people don't understand that until it's too late and they can't even get it up. But you know and you're just a kid.' I'm not a kid. I'm not a bloody kid, I think. I just nod and smile. If I knew for sure what I thought it wouldn't be so hard to talk. But as it is, thoughts and feelings keep running into each other. I can't finish any of them. I feel like I don't know anything.

That night we eat in the motel dining room. There are white napkins and candles on the table. I've never tried oysters before, so he orders Oysters Kilpatrick for me. They're delicious. I feel like I'm in Hollywood again.

Late on the afternoon of the next day, we arrive in Neutral Bay where the Chief's parents live. It's a classy looking house with rooms everywhere and old-fashioned furniture with big turned wooden legs and flower-patterned curtains and the same material covering the couches. I've put on my white uniform that morning so that it'll be a bit crushed from the trip.

'I'd like to keep seeing your sexy legs all day but if we put it on just before we get there it'll look too fresh.'

He's very smart. He knows how to make people not suspect us. He's a barrister and they think about those things.

We do the introductions. His parents are very stooped and old but they seem like friendly people. They make us a cup of tea. The Chief says what a gem I am and talks about me as if I'm not in the same room.

'Even though she thinks she's so grown up she's really just a kid. She's such a naïve little thing aren't you, Pet?'

I know he's saying that so they won't suspect anything. I play the double game, like a sixteen-year-old would say 'No, I'm not.'

'I thought I'd take her to the Cross and show her some night life.'

'Bob, no. Do you think that's a good idea? She's just a child,' says his mother.

'I'm sixteen,' I say.

'It'll be good for her. I'll take her to a Les Girls show. Broaden her mind. It's the least I can do for all she's done for the girls.'

His parents don't look too sure about the whole idea but he makes it seem so innocent.

I'm allowed to wear another outfit he's chosen for me to bring. It's a pair of brown slacks with a white short-sleeved shirt.

The Chief's in the spare room with the girls and, as usual, I'm sleeping on the sofa. Before we leave he calls

me into his room. The girls are in the kitchen with their grandma.

'I've got a little surprise for you.'

'What is it?'

'Come here.'

He puts my hand in his trouser pocket. There's a hole in it and he isn't wearing any undies.

'Oooohh.' As he coos, he bends his legs and pushes his hips forward. He closes his eyes and then opens them smiling like we're conspirators again.

At Kings Cross we don't go to Les Girls. Instead we go to a strip sex show. We sit in some dark pews with other men. I'm the only girl in the audience. While my hand's in the Chief's pocket, he points out the other men who he says are playing with themselves in the same way.

'If only they knew that this sweet little thing sitting next to me was doing to me what they're doing to themselves,' he says bending down and whispering in my ear.

The dancing girls are smiling but I know how they really feel. I try to feel sexy. But I don't.

THE CIGARETTE PACKET



I find a share house in Chatswood. This one girl in it has got a New Zealand accent that breaks me up. She's a journalist. I've never met a journalist before. She works on a travel magazine and her name, Ali Cromie, is on all her stories. They send her to the Antarctic for a day to do a travel story. Wow. Imagine being a journalist. The other person in the house is a guy called Rob Hirst. He's been studying to be a lawyer but what he really wants to do is play drums all day. Boy, does he love those drums. He's very cool, even if he is short. The other people in his band are very cool too. There's this one called Peter Garret who's got long white hair half way down his back. He's really handsome but even though they're all the same age as me, I feel different and don't fit in. Rob and Ali laugh and joke and wrestle and tickle each other. They don't do that with me. I don't know how to be with them. Also, I can't work out how a guy and girl can be as close as they seem to be and not be in the sack. Rob has a girlfriend. It doesn't add up to me.

Gough Whitlam's made uni free. Even though he got sacked after that, he'd already gone and made pensions galore and made all education free so people like me, with all that wasted potential, could go to uni and become Prime Minister themselves if they want to. Ha.

I get a barmaid job again and start at Macquarie University doing the course Miss McClure said was the hardest maths you can do. It's actuarial studies, which is statistics and hard maths. Most of it I can do, but there is one subject called Finite Differences. I don't even know what it means. I can't do it. I spend hours trying to work out one proof. I start from the end and work back and I start from the beginning and work forwards. I try from the middle and work in and out. I try everything I can think of, but the thing is, all the other kids have been doing maths all through high school and they have the formulas in their heads for whenever they need them. It's like I've learnt everything so fast I've missed something that makes them all hang together. It gets so I'm crying every other day at uni and I feel like the other kids think I'm stupid. Maybe I am.

I ring Carol. I haven't seen her for ages. She says she'll come and have lunch with me at uni.

'I don't know what to do. I try and try but I don't get it.' She isn't there five minutes and I'm blubbing. I can't stop. I don't know why I'm so upset.

'You don't have to stick at it, you know. Maybe this course isn't for you. You can always change to something else. There's nothing that says you have to finish just because you start. Nothing's worth being this upset.'

What an incredible relief. I'm beating myself up when all I have to do is drop out before the end of first term. That way I can just change courses. Ahh! The power of ideas. I defer and say I'll come back next year.

I get a second barmaid job at a hotel in Glebe to save some money. But I still have too much time on my hands because I start thinking about my pimples again. And when I say thinking about them, I mean really thinking about them.

I go on a fast. I read that fasting cleans out your whole body. That pimples are gunk on the inside coming out through the skin. So, I think if I fast for ten days that should flush them out like rats from a storm drain.

When you don't eat, the first day you get really hungry, the second day you're so hungry you want to faint, the third day you don't feel so hungry any more, and by the fourth day you're not hungry at all, and it seems like you can go on not eating for the rest of your life. The thing is, though, you start to feel weird. It's a good feeling. You start to go inside yourself and feel like God.

While I'm fasting I don't talk much. That's another thing, you don't want to talk much. I reckon I must look angelic because one morning when I'm getting ready for work, Rob comes right up to me and asks if I'm okay.

'Nnnn. Why do you ask?'

'Well, you've been a bit weird lately. I just wondered if you're okay.'

'What do you mean, weird?'

'Well, you know, kinda weird. Kinda spaced out. Like you're on acid or something.'

'No. Just fasting.' I like being mysterious because I feel very weird and special from fasting.

Ali and Rob think I'm even more of a freak than before and start avoiding me. More. The fast doesn't help my pimples either.

It isn't long after that I meet Keith. He's an accountant and I meet him in the pub where I work. He plays a computer game called tennis on one of the machines in the bar. He's a real expert and I lose to him when it isn't busy. When I'm not losing to him, we talk a lot. He's shorter than me and I'm not tall. He also wears thick glasses and has a squeaky voice and no neck so his shoulders meet his ears. He isn't cool. I'm not attracted to him but he is nice to me. That's why one day when he asks if I want to spend the weekend at his place, I say 'yes'.

He lives in a terrace house in Paddington with a long, skinny back garden that leads down to the railway tracks. It isn't the house that's so amazing but the things in it. There's an old record player with the horn on top, road signs from years ago, old biscuit tins and signs from railway stations long ago. He likes anything old, and tells me how he's been going to the tip with his Dad for years and that's where he developed an appreciation for junk. I love the place. It makes me feel at home.

His bedroom is upstairs and it has a couple of doors that go outside to a balcony. That's where we first have sex. He's very experimental and knows how to make a girl explode.

In the morning he makes breakfast and brings it up to me in bed. He's picked a rose from the garden and put it in a vase on the tray. It's the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me. I guess that's why I never go home again after that weekend. I give Robby and Ali a couple of weeks rent and move in with Keith.

He's a good chess player and teaches me. I get pretty good but I don't beat him until I've been living there for half a year.

We have an open relationship, which means he can have sex with other people and so can I. He sometimes has sex with people he knows and sometimes we have a threesome. I don't like them much. It seems to me there's always one person left out.

Keith drives a great big old Humber. For a short person it's a very big car and he can hardly see over the steering wheel. One day a guy with an English accent stops by the house to ask who owns Keith's spare parts Humber that's parked out the front. He says he has one and wants another for parts. He's handsome and wears a suit. Keith's at work and I tell him it's already being used for spare parts by my boyfriend. The guy comes onto me. I think, well, what's the point in having an open relationship if you don't have sex with other people? He seems to like me and we have sex. After that he comes a couple of times a week for a quickie. His wife's about to have a baby and he isn't getting sex at home. When he leaves I wonder why I did it. He roots away and it doesn't feel much better than being raped, but for a couple of weeks it has an animal excitement. It takes more weeks to tell him not to come any more. Saying no is like shitting razor blades. It doesn't come easily. When I tell him he can't believe it.

'I thought you liked me. I thought we worked really well together.'

I don't know why he thinks that because we never talk. He'd stop by in his Humber, come up and hump away and in fifteen minutes he'd be gone.

When he leaves the day I tell him not to come back, I lay staring at the ceiling with a voice inside me saying Look, see how easy it was? I sleep peacefully.

Keith knows about the guy with the plummy accent. Even while it's happening he doesn't seem jealous. That's probably because he's a bit kinky about sex.

I don't know where I get the idea, but I think my life isn't going exactly as I want. I'm not happy living with Keith. He's very kind but it feels empty. I get it into my head that I want to play the piano and have a place of my own. I've taken a second job as a drinks waitress in a club in the city to earn some more money to make studying at uni next year easier. I see rich older guys with young girls hanging off their arms. One old guy they call Cigar Joe because you never see him without a cigar hanging out of his mouth. He asks me to clubs and I go to see what they're like. He always tries to kiss me when he drops me home but he's gross with his one eyebrow and pregnant tummy but when I pull my mouth away he never pushes it even though he's spent a lot of money on me. Once I go to a Greek nightclub and when Cigar Joe asks me to dance, he and his mates throw hundreds of dollars on the floor while I do a Zorba dance solo to music from the film. It's very exciting and the whole restaurant goes wild.

That's the night I get the sugar daddy idea.

If old guys don't mind paying to be seen with young girls, how much more will they pay to root them? After I have this brainwave, I suddenly feel very drunk and turn to the wall, which I'm fortunately sitting next to, and vomit all my dinner and the half bottle of Tia Maria and milk I've drunk on the floor. I'm glad I'm with these guys because when you tip like they do, you and your girls can do practically anything and the waiters stay polite and say not to worry about a little thing like vomit all over the floor.

The next day I go to the newspaper classified office and ask to put in an ad.

'I want the ad to say: "Sugar Daddy wanted to buy piano, pay for piano lessons and rent a nice flat in exchange for sex with 18-year-old girl. Must be interesting and play chess".'

The woman behind the counter looks up over the top of her glasses.

'Are you serious?' I nod.

'Can you just wait over there for a minute please? I'll be back in a sec.'

She comes back with a young guy who has worse pimples than me. He has a pen and notepaper and starts asking me questions about what I'm looking for and why.

'I think people get together for all different reasons. Like even married women get what they want in exchange for sex, so I'm just being more up front about it.' This is straight from Mary. She always talked about wives being like unpaid prostitutes and slave labor.

He says he can give it more space in the paper so more people will read about it and I'll get more applications than if it goes in the classified section. He asks if I mind having my photo taken for the story. He says I can use a different name so, even though I don't care about disguising myself because who'd be worried what I did? But I use my sister's name and say I'm Jennifer.

'I haven't got enough money to pay for a bigger story. How much will it cost?'

'Nothing. You don't have to pay anything.' And he gives me a big smile.

Well, the hullabaloo that causes. Next day when the story comes out on page three of the newspaper, I have people calling me from all over. They want me to be on the news that night, on the radio the next morning and on a daytime television show the next day. The news people say I can disguise myself to do the interview and they say they can put me in what they call 'silouhette'. I agree and put a silly turban on my head like Jackie O.

That guy at the newspaper turns out to be right. I get hundreds of letters. I even get a letter from a guy in prison. The weirdest one is a piano teacher who lives way, way out. It might as well be Afghanistan.

'I'll pay for a taxi for you to get here.'

'It really sounds a bit far away,' I say, even though him being a piano teacher has me interested.

'When you meet me and see the situation I've got to offer, I'm confident you won't find anyone more suitable than myself,' he says in a very stuffy way.

I do meet him. He's quite old and ugly with acne pits gouged into his face like craters. He's also got blue and red veins sticking out of his forehead and he's one of those guys that when they get bald, part a few hairs over the bald bit. Gross. His house is very depressing too. There are little white stones all over the front instead of grass. The house has aluminium windows and not a green thing to be seen near it. There's no point going in but when a guy's paid for you to come all that way in a taxi and you want him to pay for you to get back you'd better go in and make like you're at least a bit interested.

First he shows me the kids' room.

'This is where you'll sleep. We can put a bunk in for the girls. So I'll tell my wife that you're here to look after them after school and do the housework. That'll be our cover. Then I can give you piano lessons every day.'

'And how would we have sex?' Is this guy for real?

'We can both sneak out in the night. My wife's a very sound sleeper. We can do it in the lounge room.'

I tell him I'll think about it.

'All right, you do that. You have a think about it overnight. I'm sure I'll be hearing from you.'

And people think I'm weird.

There's another old guy, probably 70, that I meet at a ritzy, expensive hotel. He's in a smoking jacket! Like you see in old movies. He says he makes his living gambling in Monte Carlo and wants a youthful 'companion'. He says he'll buy me dresses and jewellery so I'll fit in. He says obviously I'll have my own urges but if I'm discreet he can 'accommodate' that. He's a gentleman who looks like he might have been pretty handsome when he was young. It really is a shame he's just that bit too old because it sounds like it might be an interesting life all right.

While I'm meeting the guys I lie awake at night dreaming of being in a beautiful flat with a grand piano in the corner of the lounge. In the dream I practice all day long, learn very fast and have a teacher who believes in me. My sugar daddy talks to him about my progress and they're both proud of me.

The guy I choose in the end is Seb. He's short, bald and pudgy around the middle, but he doesn't care. He takes me out for dinner at a posh restaurant. We talk all night. He's Jewish and was in Auschwitz for two years when he was a teenager. He tells me the story of his life and I'm fascinated. He worked as a waiter after the war in a ritzy place on the Black Sea where they had to take tablets to stop them from sweating all over the food. Then he'd come to Australia and married his wife, who was also in Auschwitz. They don't have any kids but they've been married for twenty years. Now he's rich, I think, because he owns lots of houses and a fashion shop in Kings Cross. Even though he doesn't look cool, he is. At the end of the night he tells me how he wants it to be.

'All these things you say you want. A piano, lessons, a flat. It is too complicated for me. What I am suggesting, if you agree to choose me for your, how do you say, sugar daddy, I pay you, and I am not an ungenerous person, and you can do all these things for yourself. You are a grown woman, no?'

I think about it over dinner. Yes, I do want to change my life and have piano lessons, but Seb is interesting. Also, there's something I can't explain pulling me down the same road as Mother. It's like in some part of me I'm living her life and living out my past with the Chief all in one. It's like quicksand but there's nothing I can grab to pull myself out. I decide not to try. I go with the flow.

I've never eaten in a restaurant like this before. It's really swish. There are candles on the tables and the waiters are wearing black suits with cummerbunds. One thing about Seb, he seems to know a lot about food. We talk about our lives and eat a feast. He orders a bottle of wine specially for me. Blue Nun. It's heaven. After he's told me about me being a grown woman, which does wonders for my sophistication barometer, he pulls some money out of his wallet so that no-one can see.

'What I am going to do, is I'm going to put this \$100 into the cigarette packet. Then I'm going to the bathroom. If you want to accept my arrangement, you simply take the cigarette packet, and put it in your bag. Then we can go to my house. My wife is away. If the packet is still there when I return ... this is the life and I will thank you for a charming evening and drive you home.'

So James Bond. So sophisticated. So Hollywood. He might be short and pudgy like Cigar Joe but he's so much smarter and I like him straight away. I can feel the quicksand under my feet but I want to be sophisticated with sex. For a reason I don't understand, I want it enough to sink into the abyss I know deep down is there.

I've met a lot of the other guys because of the newspaper article, but none are as worldly as Seb. I take the cigarette packet and put it in my bag. When he comes back, he smiles. It's a kind of dignified smile like he doesn't want to make an idiot of himself over how happy he is.

He takes me to his house in his big fat Mercedes. He lives in Rose Bay, which is a pretty toffy suburb. His house isn't the Hollywood type house I think it's going to be but it's quite nice.

I decide in the car how I'm going to do it. When we arrive he goes off somewhere to another part of the house. I take my clothes off and sit on the couch.

'You are so intelligent,' he says when he comes in. He has this big, happy, dignified smile again.

Why make it difficult? Then he takes me into his bedroom and we have sex. One good thing about the sex is that he asks what I like and how I like it. I teach him to touch me gently. I like it like a feather but most guys seem to think if they're not touching you hard they're not doing anything. A lot of guys are stupid like that. Like if you tell them to be gentle it's like you're talking another language. That's if they're even interested in talking about it at all.

During the next week I make some calls to piano teachers from the yellow pages. I try to explain that I'm looking for

someone who knows the connection between maths and music. I want someone to be like a mentor for me, like Miss McClure. Someone who can see that I could learn very quickly if they believed in me. I try a couple of teachers but they get cross because they don't have any idea what I'm talking about. I'm not entirely sure myself. I give up on the piano idea.

The next time I see Seb, a few days later, we play chess. He's even better than Keith. I was starting to beat Keith, but, every time I play Seb, he comes out of nowhere and demolishes me.

Seb and I spend so much time together he begins to feel like a friend. Sex with him is straight forward, satisfying and short. I'm not attracted to him physically but I like his company. After our business we play chess and talk for hours.

I also visit his fashion shop. It's summer and I wear maybe a silky white toga dress with a low neckline that frames my best feature, sleek collar bones. I like the way he preens when I walk in. I can't believe he doesn't try to hide me from the two staff members who know his wife. Jewish people must have different values.

He also takes me to dinner and sometimes to swish clubs. A lot of the people who go to the clubs drive Rolls Royces and there's a guy at the door who parks them so their owners don't have to walk anywhere. Seb has a brand new Mercedes but he's the poor guy among his super rich friends who are mostly Jewish. People who aren't Jewish are supposed to call Jewish people 'Jewish people' but they call each other Jews. He tells me a lot of his Jewish friends have been in the camps in the war.

The first night I go to the swishest club, I feel like I'm part of this big old town for a night. It isn't in Kings Cross but not far away in Woollomooloo. There are three floors and different rooms where people play chess or backgammon, dance or sit around talking. Seb and I sit where you can drink and talk. I think there's a gambling room hidden away up the top, too. Seb's always taking me to illegal gambling places. He gives me money to go off and lose to keep me happy. I feel a bit like an expensive puppy dog but it reminds me of gorgeous girls hanging around The Mob in Hollywood movies. People like him all seem to gamble.

Seb tells me stories of people he knows; who their girlfriends are, what camp they've been in and how they make their money. One guy's fat and old and even though he's the richest man in the place his suit looks like the buttons are about to burst off. He's sitting beside a pin-up girl young enough to be his daughter, but she's leaning too close to him for that.

'He can buy anyone in this room twice over,' says Seb.

'See the girl? People think she's with him for the money but I think she really loves him. You just have to see them together to see how much she loves him.'

'Is he married?'

'Of course he's married. We're all married.'

'Don't they love their wives?'

'Of course they do. That's why they stay with them. But these are the ones they're really in love with. There's a difference.'

'Do you love your wife?'

'Of course. We came to this country together. We've shared a whole life. I can never leave her. But if I could, and I've thought about it many times, I'd take you to Europe and live with you there.'

Men. Doesn't he know I don't love him? Why would he presume I'd want to go? And does he really think that gorgeous thing, who could have any man she wants, would love that old guy if he worked in a post office?

That's when I decide I'm never going to go after what I want by hanging off a guy. If I'm ever going to have a fancy car it'll be with my own money. And if I'm ever going to be rich, I won't ever have to pretend I'm someone I'm not all day every day to have it. Why be rich if it's really someone else's money?

The point is, even though I take money from Seb, I do it on my terms. I don't have to pretend I love him. Okay, I don't go around telling him I don't love him, but then on the other hand, I think we're quite close. That's why it's a surprise when he says he wants me to have a foursome with one of his rich Jewish friends and another girl. I say Yes because he says he wants to show me off to his friend. He thinks I'm fantastic in bed. I agree because I'm flattered and I don't want him to think I'm not sophisticated enough to know that this is what sophisticated people do.

So we meet at the girl's flat in Rose Bay. It's an elegant home. Seb says she's a model and sleeps with his friend Abe for a bit of extra money. He says she has a daughter in primary school. We get there before Abe. Heidi's sexy in a European buxom kind of way. I can see why she's a model. It seems funny to me that such a beautiful woman who lives in such an elegant flat has to have sex for money, but you learn things every day. She's friendly and smiles but you can see this is business to her. She takes us into the bedroom where there's the biggest bed I've ever seen and modern pictures with splashes and dots hanging on the walls. The sun lights up the room like a painting and makes what we're about to do seem somehow more tasteful.

'You can freshen up in there.' She gives me a face washer and points to a door in the bedroom. I go in and stand in the middle of a small bathroom. I look at the face washer and then at the bathroom. What exactly does she mean by 'freshen up'? I've already had a shower this morning. I look at myself in the mirror and then at the face washer again. What can she possibly mean? She's given me a face washer so I must have to wash my face. So that's what I do, even though my face isn't dirty.

When I come out, Abe's already there. Seb introduces us. Heidi takes the lead. You can tell she knows Abe really well and she tells us all to take our clothes off.

It seems like she and I are going to be the first act. She starts to work on me and then looks up.

'You naughty girl, you didn't freshen up like I told you to.'

Oh, that kind of freshening up. I'm so embarrassed I have a hard time coming. Then I realise there's quite a lot of

pressure on me. Abe and Seb watch, telling each other how much Heidi and I are enjoying ourselves. I do come in the end but it's hard work. I feel sorry for Heidi down there when I haven't freshened up or anything. If only she'd been more clear.

Afterwards, we girls go to work on the guys. We do each other's guys because otherwise what's the point of being together. It goes on for an hour or so and then we all go off to have showers. Seb and me go to the other bathroom together.

'I think she likes you very much. I think if we were not here she would want to have sex with you alone, or at least ask for your number. What do you think?'

'I don't think so at all. It's just a job for her.'

'No! You didn't see the look on her face when you were coming. I'm sure she likes you.'

She was probably orgasming because she could finally stop. I took ages to come.

'Look, I'll call a taxi for myself and Abe and say we have to go straight away. You stay and take a coffee with her and you see, she will ask for your number, to meet you again. She wants to take you to bed again.'

I know Seb's wrong but there's no getting in the way of a guy's fantasy. Guys have no idea about women who have sex for money. They tell themselves they do it because they love sex so much. Guys don't understand women at all.

When Seb's paying me, and he put double what he usually gives me in my handbag, \$200, he gives me a little nod and wink in Heidi's direction.

As soon as they're out the door, Heidi changes from being a charming, smiling thing to rushing around like a mad woman.

'I have to pick my daughter up from school at 3.30. I told Abe that. You'll have to wait for the taxi outside. And anyway, why didn't you freshen up when I told you to?'

'I didn't know what you meant. I've never done this before.'

'Madonna! Look, I have to go. Get your things.'

I tell Seb next time I see him what she said and that she doesn't fancy me at all. He scratches his head and still doesn't quite believe me. Men.

After that Seb asks if I will have sex alone with Abe and also with another one of his rich Jewish friends. He's been talking about me and they want to 'try me out'. I sound like a car. I think, if Seb likes me why would he want me to have sex with his friends for money? I don't realise he sees me as a common, garden variety prostitute, which is really what I am, but I feel more like I'm having an affair with him.

I go out to dinner with Abe first. Afterwards we go to a rich hotel. It's ordinary sex and I think he's arrogant.

Seb's disappointed his friend doesn't think I'm Marilyn Monroe.

The next week I sleep with his other friend, Sol. I talk to him about his war experiences. He's been in Auschwitz too.

'One night I went to bed and there was a whole barrack crammed with men. I knew these men, I'd worked with them. Then in the morning the whole place was empty. Completely. They'd been gassed overnight. Every one of them. Maybe 500 people. You can't imagine the feeling of knowing that 500 people had just been murdered. Killed. Every one of them. For no reason. No reason whatever.'

We're in bed when he's telling me. Then he starts kissing me in a very weird way. No tongue, just little, non-sexual type pecks over and over again on the lips. It's very annoying. I try to make them more sensual but I think his soul is still back there in the ovens. It's like he's trying to kiss every one of those 500 people, on and on forever in his sleep.

'Did you ever have sex in the camp?' I ask, because I want him to stop kissing me weirdly.

'I don't want to talk about it any more. It seems like another life. I don't want to think about it.'

Like with Abe, I don't come. Seb makes me feel bad about it.

'I thought you were something very special, but Abe and Sol both say you are ordinary. So you are not so fantastic in bed as I thought.'

He's trying to make me feel bad because he hasn't impressed his friends. He doesn't know it was them who weren't good in bed. They didn't know that for them to really enjoy it the woman has to come. Seb knows that. But because his friends are richer than him, he thinks they must be better lovers too. I never have to sleep with his friends again after that.

It's when I'm with Keith that I first meet Joanne. I don't know when I meet her she's going to be the best friend of my whole life. She and her partner Robert sold Keith the Paddington house and they'd moved to Balmain. Joanne has a hoity toity little girl voice but tells the funniest stories. Robert's editing the *Auntie Jack Show* for the ABC. They live in a sweet two-storey house that has paintings and ornaments everywhere. Her bed's exploding with white fluffy cushions, doonas, pillows, and bolsters. There's antique furniture all over the place, including an old barber's chair they found in an abandoned house. It isn't like Keith's place though, which is just one cluttered mess. It looks to me like fairyland and I want to lie down and sleep and never leave.

Joanne has skin smooth as paper, high cheek bones and eyebrows so thin and perfectly arched she used to get detention at school for plucking them even though she hadn't. She tells me the story when I comment on her beautiful eyebrows the first time we meet. Joanne loves telling stories and I love to listen.

She warms to me because I laugh at all her jokes — she's a very funny woman — and we decide to meet again the next

day when the guys aren't there. I go to her house because she has agoraphobia, which she tells me is when you can't always go out of your house because you get panic attacks. She says she's always getting panic attacks. But when she's at home mostly she doesn't. This day she has us both rolling around on her white lacey bed telling me about how Keith had this crush on her.

'I didn't know what to do. He kept ringing me and wanting to visit when Robert wasn't here. He'd say he wanted to take me to some exhibition or other and I'd say I had a migraine. But it got to the stage where I had a migraine every time he called. Anyway, I decided I would go out with him but I'd eat a head of garlic beforehand. Well, we got in the car and the smell was so putrid it nearly knocked us both out. Even with the windows open. I think I might have overdone it just a tad. But I couldn't believe it! He still tried to kiss me! With me smelling like Mussolini!'

'What did you do?' I'm laughing so hard because I know Keith and it is exactly what he would do.

'Well, in the end I just had to tell him that I'm as good as married to Robert and I don't fool around. I think he got the message but I was mortified every time I saw him for about a year after that.' Joanne is always being mortified or mollified about something. I can tell she likes the way words sound. I do too.

Then I tell her about my sugar daddy story. She laughs and laughs.

'You're priceless. I love it!'

We're inseparable from that day.

I go over there all the time. She tells me about her grandfather who was a Jewish bookie who wouldn't pay for a false leg for her mother when she got cancer and had to have her leg chopped off when Joanne was eleven. Joanne's dad's a jazz drummer and hates his father for that. She tells how the bookie guy's wife, Joanne's grandmother, tried to run away from her husband so many times but he sent men after her to bring her back and he beat her. When Joanne was staying there, her grandma would take her by the hand down to the incinerator and burn the furs and clothes the grandfather had given her. She'd also wash the money he gave her and hang it on the line, saying it was dirty money.

Joanne tells me how her mother died of cancer alone in hospital because the nurses pushed her and her father out into the hospital corridor while her mum cried out for them. She died alone that night and Joanne was never the same afterwards. That's when she got agoraphobia.

Joanne's so open and honest and funny. She's like a mum to me even though she's only eight years older.

At home, I realise I have to get away from Keith. I don't love him. I realise if I keep living with him, I'll be stuck forever. I don't want to be stuck with a dog just because he's nice to me. I decide to go overseas for a few months and hope Keith finds someone else. I decide to go before uni starts again next year. I remember what the English-teaching guy in Bangkok told me about how much money you can make in Japan. So that's where I think I'll go. I should tell Keith I won't be with him when I come back. I'm being a coward but I don't want to hurt his feelings. One thing I can't stand is hurting someone's feelings.

It's a Friday night after the girls have been picked up by their grandma early in the afternoon. I'm more in love with the Chief every day. But I like company and get lonely on my own. I day dream about the Chief taking me out, just the two of us, but he never does. That's what makes me get an idea. I know where he drinks in a bar at the Southern Cross Hotel. He'd said he was going out for a drink after work and wouldn't be home until late. I bet he meant at the Southern Cross.

I decide to dress in my mustard colored sleeveless linen dress with buttons right down the front. I put make-up on and some gorgeous little white sandals. I've got a fantastic straw hat with a wide brim. It's summer and I think I look like Scarlett in *Gone With The Wind*.

Just after *Sesame Street*, I go out and catch a tram into the city, walk to the Southern Cross and sit in the bar. I keep my hat on even though it's quite dark in there because what's the point in having a great hat if people can't see you wearing it. I wait to run into the Chief. I order a Campari and lemonade and nobody asks for ID so I must look pretty sophisticated and a lot older than fourteen. I try not to watch everybody who walks in the door.

Groups of men start looking in my direction. I sip my drink and look around.

'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?' says one guy with red veins sticking out of his face and a beer gut hanging over his pants. He's wearing a suit but doesn't talk like the Chief. His friends are winking at him and he keeps looking back at them. One's quite cute but the rest have big stomachs like him.

'I'm waiting for a friend.'

'You've been waiting for a while, girlie. Let me buy you a drink. Seems to me like you've been stood up.'

'No, it's okay. I'll be right. I'm sure he'll come soon.'

'Come on lovey. Just one. Can't hurt. What are you drinking?'

'Campari and lemonade, but really, I'm fine, thanks. I don't want another one.'

I want him to go away. When the Chief comes I don't want him to see me talking to another man.

'Okay lovey, but the offer still stands.'

Then he sends a drink over, anyway, but he stays where he is. When I start drinking his drink, he holds his glass up to 'cheers' me and the others do too.

I'm glad they aren't coming over because I can't risk the Chief being jealous. This is going to be our special night. Maybe he'll even take me out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. He took me and the girls to this fancy restaurant on Albert Park Lake once. He ordered me a shrimp cocktail which I'd never had before. It was very sophisticated.

There are some ladies in the bar too. They have on skirt suits and have long hair and painted nails. They're surrounded by groups of men who treat them like princesses. I can't tell you how much I want to be like those ladies. I want to be part of the crowd so much I nearly talk to the guy who bought me the drink. He sends over another one after a while and cheers me again with his glass in the air. But I don't go and talk to him. I tell myself the Chief will turn up any minute. I keep imagining how surprised he'll be to find me looking so great and so sophisticated. Not so very actually different to those ladies with the skirt suits and painted nails.

I can't help looking at both doors. I don't know which way he'll come. The clock moves pretty slow until I start getting drunk. Then I get hungry. I order some sausage rolls and chips from the bar and eat them while I wait. I drop a couple on my lap and get oil stains down the front of my dress. I have to knock back a couple more guys who try to charm the pants off me. I guess they're getting drunk too.

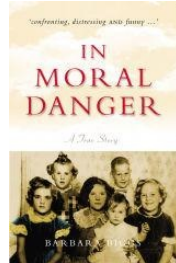
I start to think the Chief isn't coming. Maybe he went somewhere else to drink. Right now, he's probably out somewhere with some lady not thinking about me at all. Here I am waiting and thinking about him for hours. And then I start thinking about how he probably never thinks about me unless we're in bed and that he really doesn't care about me at all.

It's an awful thing I know, but at times like this when my head seems like it's about to explode, I say my hate mantra over and over. By the time it's nine o'clock, I know he isn't coming and I decide to go home.

I pretend to go to the toilet so I can sneak out so the guy who bought me the drinks won't stop me. I just want to get home because I feel so bad. I carry my hat because no matter how nice your hat looks you can't wear it at night and what's the point if the person you're wearing it for isn't even there. I catch the tram down Victoria Parade to the bridge near our house. I say my mantra on the way home. When I get there the first thing I see inside the door is the drawing of Vernon. I think, he's not my Chief. He isn't even a real boyfriend.

I grab the iron doorstep and throw it at the picture. The glass smashes. I don't know why it makes me feel better but you wouldn't think so the way I carry on afterwards. I lean back against the wall behind me and slide down it, like you see people do in the movies sometimes, and I sob until salty snot mixes with tears at the corner of my mouth. I kick my hat that's lying at my feet every now and then and that helps too. When I slow down a bit I look at the picture and get fresh energy all over again. When I finish crying, I creep into Kate's bed and fall asleep.

ALMOST CIVILIZED



When I get to the hotel in Tokyo the guide book recommends, the first thing I do is ask if there's anyone there who speaks English or is Australian. That had worked in Cambodia. The man at the desk speaks English and gives me the room number of an Australian girl staying here. I go and knock on her door to find out what's what.

'Hi. My name's Barbara. I've just arrived from Australia and I was wondering if I could ask a few things.'

'Like what kind of things?' She looks like the Virgin Mary with sad eyes that are so light blue they seem to follow you like holy pictures. But that's where her similarity to the Virgin Mary ends.

'I came to Japan because this guy I met in Bangkok said you could teach English here for good money.'

She looks me in the eyes, looks either side of the passageway outside her room to see if I've got anyone with me, and tells me to come inside.

'I'm Kirsty, by the way.' She lights a cigarette and looks at me sideways.

'Nice to meet you.'

'Well, the story's this. They've been cracking down on people working illegally lately. A lot of the schools just aren't taking people unless they've got a work permit.'

'Are you working?'

'I've been working but I'm on my way home.'

'I hope you're wrong because I came with hardly any money. How do you know they're cracking down?'

'Well, that's what everyone's been telling me. I could be wrong. You should give it a go and see what happens.'

'How long've you been here?'

'Six months. I'm going home in less than a week.'

'Were you teaching?'

'Well, I haven't actually been teaching English.'

'What've you been doing?'

'Oh, a bit of this and that.' She doesn't want to say right now. I'll get it out of her later. I'm curious.

'Look, have you eaten yet? Do you want to? I just got here and I wouldn't mind looking around.'

She agrees and we wander around the streets half the night. She shows me Akasaka and the Ginza where transvestites hang out, where the best discos are and good places to eat.

The next day I go looking for jobs teaching English and find out Kirsty knows what she's talking about. Nobody wants to have anything to do with a gaijin without work papers. Gaijins are foreigners. I talk about it with Kirsty. That's when I find out what she's really been doing in Japan.

'I just have to get work. I can't even survive a week here without earning something. I only have about \$1000 and even a bloody apple costs six bucks. I've got to get a job.'

'Well, I do know someone who could help, but it's not teaching English.'

'What then. I'll do anything.'

'Do you know what a Turkish bath is?'

'It's a sauna or something.'

'Not exactly. They've got these places all over Japan. You basically have sex with the customers, but it's not like in Australia.'

'You mean, like a brothel?'

'Yes. But they're not like Australian brothels. The money's absolutely fantastic. If you're good, you can earn \$1000 a

night.'

'You're kidding?'

'That's if you're good.'

'What if you're not good?'

'Then maybe ... \$500 a night. But it's still better money than you can make doing anything else here. And because it's an acceptable part of the culture, guys are pretty respectful.'

'But what's the work like?'

'Look, like anything, it's what you make it. When I worked I was one of the best. If customers ask for you, you can make a bucket. I had a lot of repeat business. All you have to do is be really sweet and they'll ask for you again. Japanese men like sweet, subservient women. You just have to get inside the mind of a Japanese man and you can make a mint.'

'And how many men in a day would you have to do?'

'Maybe ten.'

'Don't you get sore?'

'You get used to it. Think about it. It doesn't seem like you've got a lot of options. If you want to do it you'll have to decide soon because I'm leaving in two days. If you do, I'll introduce you to the go-between. His name's Tom. Tom Tanaka. He's Japanese, but speaks English. You pay him Y100,000, that's about \$500, and he'll take you there and introduce you to the owner. Then you're on your own, kiddo.'

I don't know why she calls me kiddo because she's only 23 and I'm 19. She does seem more worldly than me but I'm hardly a kid.

I think about it that night. It's upping the stakes from what I've been doing with Seb but I know this will be striking out further down that road. I still sometimes play the dice game in my head because I don't want to live a boring life. I want to take life by the horns and ride it to the full. Kirsty sets up a meeting with Tom and soon we're on our way to Yokohama to meet the owner of a bathhouse there. In the taxi it feels like I'm going through a tunnel where there's no turning back. Deliberately going the wrong way but doing nothing to change direction. Part of me is trotting off with a lump of excitement in my belly while another part — I can almost feel her as a separate part of me — shakes her head as though she knows it's the road to disaster.

We get to the Turkish bath and it looks like somewhere I've seen in old dubbed movies. There's a path with uneven stepping-stones laid into ground made of pebbles with water trickling over them. Just inside the door there's a bridge that could be for kids it's so small. There's quiet oriental music like in one of those old movies. We go into a room and sit on cushions on the floor while we wait for the owner to come. A Japanese lady in a kimono brings us green tea.

The owner comes with a friend and we stand up for the introductions. Tom and the two men talk in Japanese while I watch and listen to water that makes a hollow sound falling down bamboo pipes sliced in half. I realise it's all designed to make you feel relaxed, and it works.

'He want know if you have somewhere to live?'

'Not near here. No.'

'You want him give you place? He has place for other foreign girls who wor' here.'

'Yes. That'd be great.'

'He also say because you never wor' in this kind place before, he need try you out. Okay?'

'What do you mean? How do you try someone out?'

'He have sex with you and he teach you and if you not know, he teach you right way. Japanese way.'

It isn't like I haven't done it before. But the owner takes me to one of the rooms where there's a big bed with white sheets on it. The room has grass matting. There's the shower and bath down a couple of steps. The bath is a glass cube with a spotlight behind it that makes the bath into a giant fish tank. I've never seen anything like it. There's soothing music playing somewhere. He shows me how I have to help the customer undress and then I give him a bath and wash him with a face washer all over. He brings out a rubber mat and shows me how to soap him all over and massage his body with my own. Then he shows me how to dry him and we have sex, which seems like just a job for him because he's teaching me. After he finishes I put him back in the bath and dress him.

During the whole time he doesn't say a word.

We go back to Tom and the guy takes out Y10,000 and gives it to me.

'He say he pay half. Price Y20,000, but he keep half because he teacher.'

It seems to me almost civilized.

I move from the hotel that night into the new apartment. There's an American girl who calls herself Charity but her real name's Anna. Everyone has a working name the Japanese can understand. She has long blonde hair, rock-like boobs and a set of American teeth that seem to glow in the dark.

'You're just gonna' love it,' Anna tells me. 'I can't believe I've got the best job in the whole damn world and I'm bein' paid for it? C'mon! I'm savin' to buy a place in Alaska. You ever been there?'

'No. Never. It must be nice.'

'It's soooo bewdiful. I got about \$250,000 saved up already and I just need another \$100,000. I should have that in another six months. Depends.'

Charity fills me in on everything.

'We get paid Y20,000, that's about a hundred bucks for every customer. You take it in turns with the other gaijin girls, unless someone specially asks for you. The Japanese girls only get Y15,000 and that's why they don't like us gaijins much. Just ignore 'em. They can be real bitchy. And I mean real bitchy. But hey, gurl! You'll be fine. There's only five of us gaijins here right now so there'll be lotsa work.'

I start the next night.

As time goes on, sex with the Chief gets more and more weird. He sometimes dresses in suspender belts and stockings and asks me how he looks. What do you say when a pudgy old man with skinny white legs asks you how he looks in suspenders and stockings? I feel embarrassed. I don't know where to look or what to say the first time. That's one day when the girls are in the house. He usually doesn't do anything weird while they're here but this time he does. Suddenly Kate calls out to him from the other side of his bedroom door when he's just put them on. I don't think about it, I just go to the door to see what she wants. He gets really mad.

'What are you doing?' he screams at me. 'DON'T open that door!' And he bends over and goes behind the bed to hide. Well, a man his size can't hide behind a bed no matter what. He looks pretty funny but I try hard not to laugh because my instincts tell me he won't like that one little bit.

A lot of the sex is pretty bloody confusing.

I finally meet Belinda, the barmaid. That's weird too. Nothing's ever simple with the Chief. He hatches this plan with me. The only thing is, I don't get the plot.

'You get dressed to go out. I've already told her it's your night off. When she comes I'll introduce you and then you leave. I'll take her out the back to show her the garden and you sneak back in and hide under the bed. Okay?'

'Okay.' There doesn't seem any point asking why. I know by now I won't understand.

Belinda comes and everything goes to plan. It seems like ages I'm under the bed before they come in. He doesn't waste any time getting started, though. Lying there in the musty darkness, all I can smell is sweaty shoes. I can hear panting and groaning.

'Imagine if young Barb came home early and saw us now,' he says to her.

'She wouldn't, would she?' She sounds like she wants to run at the very idea.

'No chance. She won't get back until at least midnight. But I think she'd be pretty shocked, don't you?'

He keeps talking about me. It goes on and on. I wonder how much longer I have to stay under that old bed. I go from being bored to being scared she'll hear me breathing.

After they finish he tells her she should take a shower.

'Did you like that, Pet?' he whispers to me. He nearly blinds me with the light when he lifts up the bedspread. 'If only she knew.' Then he buries me under there in darkness again and snickers away quietly to himself. I roll, then cross, my eyes and pucker my mouth like Bugs Bunny. I do that sometimes. It used to make Pommy laugh. I wonder if she'd laugh if she was lying under a bed for two hours while people have sex on top of her head? I realise I have a lot of growing up to do.

Belinda finishes in the bathroom and he can't wait to get her out of here. He calls a taxi while she gets dressed. I can see one of her platform shoes near the edge of the bedspread and I hold my breath. It's one thing to be found when the Chief's there to do the explaining, another entirely to be found out alone.

After Upstart Belinda leaves, I bluff my way through the post mortem. I can't be jealous because of the way he talks about her, but I can't understand how me being under the bed seems to make things so much better for him.

Life with the Chief is pretty bloody confusing all right.

KNITTED SUIT



I do five customers on the first night. The guys are polite, like Kirsty said. All you have to do is meet them at the bottom of the stairs where you're kneeling down when they see you. You say Irashai Masen, which is Japanese for welcome, and then take them up and do to them exactly what I'd done with the owner. I don't like the work and can't believe Charity says she loves it. Guys sticking themselves inside you all day. It sure as hell isn't my idea of fun. On the second night, after the first two customers, I don't want to do any more. I feel sick at the idea. I tell Charity she can do the next one that comes for me.

'I can't do that, honey. They'll think I'm tryin' ta steal your customers. What's wrong with you, gurl? Ain't you here to make money? You wanna make money don'cha?'

She's standing there with her hands on her hips and head cocked to one side.

'I'm just a bit tired, that's all.'

She shakes her head and clicks her tongue. She can't believe what a dickhead I am.

They call me for my next customer and I go, but my mind is heading the other way. I'm frantically thinking of a way to buy time.

I'm down in the room setting it up with sheets and towels. This time I've got the room with the bath in the shape of a shell. When I've finished, I sit there instead of going down to get the guy. That's when the idea comes to me. It's not much of an idea but I haven't got much time. I lie across the bed and pretend I've passed out. The phone rings and rings but I don't answer it. Someone comes to see what's going on and they find me draped over the bed breathing fast and shallow. The woman's babbling away to me in Japanese. I don't open my eyes so she goes to get someone else. More and more people come and they slap my face a bit but I start breathing faster, with short tiny breaths. I manage to gurgle and dribble. They open my eye to look at my pupils and it's very embarrassing. Everyone's watching.

They call an ambulance. I think they're going to send me home. No such luck. Maybe I overdid it. They take me to a hospital where they put me in machines that X-ray, turn me upside down and scan every part of me. They get me to drink gross tasting liquid so another machine can see into my stomach. I'm there for hours and they don't find anything because there's nothing to find. They give me the bill. It's Y400,000 or \$2000 which is more than I can earn in six months in Australia. I can't believe it. Someone translates for me that the owner paid it but I have to pay him back through working.

That's my initiation into the business.

I go back to work the next day and Kirsty's right. I do get used to it. In the day I go down the big street nearby and shop. I buy so many clothes I can wear a different combination every day for weeks because you have to give yourself something for working. All the girls do it except Charity. They spend all their money. They all say they're working to save up for something, but they buy dope and sexy clothes and perfume in bottles with glass animals for lids and facials and come back with perfectly painted toenails and hair that gleams. I only buy clothes because I have to pay half what I earn back to the owner for the hospital bill.

The Japanese girls don't like us. They used to get more work before we arrived. The prettiest one is tall for a Japanese. She looks intelligent but she uses her makeup case as a pillow! It's like a giant brick. And she sleeps on it! The gaijin girls, they're the other foreigners, tell me they do it because it doesn't mess up their hair, which looks like a black plastic ice cream on a cone. They have kimonos that I'm told cost thousands of dollars for one. The things women do.

Most of the customers are salarymen. I arrive at the end of their year when they get a bonus for being good workers, so it's very busy. I learn Japanese while I'm waiting for customers, and that way when I have one I can talk and try to make some connection. I also try to make sure I come once a day. There's usually someone interested enough in you having an orgasm to put in the effort.

One of the bad things about the job is when it's busy and you have more than six customers in a night your skin starts to crack with all the soap.

'Ya gotta not get in the bath with 'em and ya gotta not use soap with every one otherwise your skin's just gonna fall off. Last year I had dermatitis so bad I couldn't work for a month,' Charity says.

Most guys usually come about five minutes after you hit the bed, so I use the rest of the hour talking to them, practising my Japanese.

There's one guy who's so sad. He's tall for anyone, but for a Japanese he's a giant. He has to duck to get through the door. When he takes his clothes off, I see he's got the biggest dick I've ever seen. When it isn't even hard it hangs half way down to his knees.

'Solly, solly,' he keeps saying. He's saying sorry for having such a big dick. I can see why because it's also very fat, as thick as my wrist. He tells me he can't have sex with anyone. He can't have a girlfriend because when girls see him naked they never come near him again.

I really want to have sex with him because I feel sorry for him. We try. I let him go as long as I can stand it and when I start crying with pain I do it quietly so he can't hear me. He's as gentle as he can be but he can't go inside me more than a couple of centimetres. Then he pushes gently but a bit harder and I cry out. When he sees me crying he stops and hangs his head. He looks so sad I cuddle him and he starts to cry too, but I can see his pride's in the way and he won't stay long. I'm right and soon he's gone and I know no woman is ever going to be able to love him the way a man

needs to be loved.

There's another guy who I won't do because I think he's 'biyoki', meaning sick. I think he has some kind of terrible VD because he has lumps all over his dick. He keeps saying he isn't sick but I have eyes. I call down to the front desk and they tell me he isn't sick either. They say something I don't understand and give him to another girl. When I get back to the waiting room the others explain that some Japanese have pearls sewn into their dicks because they think it gives a woman more pleasure. I think guys are too focussed on their dicks. Don't they know that a vagina has hardly any nerves and wouldn't know if there were pearls sewn down the side of a dick or not?

There's another guy who always comes really late when all the other gaijins have gone home. He usually has Rosa who's a bit fat. All he wants is for a fat white woman to sit on his face. He says it's the only way he can have an orgasm but it takes a while with me because I'm not fat enough.

'Kin Yamada. Yeah, I usually do him,' Rosa tells me the next day. 'He's like that 'cause when he was a little kid, about twelve I think, he worked as a houseboy in this American general's house just after the war. The general was away a lot and his wife was home alone. Well, one day she got Kin and sat on his face and wouldn't let him up 'til he made her come. He says he couldn't breathe but he had to do something because otherwise she'd suffocate him, poor kid. Then he used to have to do it all the time. One day she even had this little private lunch party and asked some of her friends and told them to leave their underwear at home. She put old Kin under the table and he had to do all of them. Now the only way he can have an orgasm is if a white girl with a big bum sits on his face. Sad, eh?'

Sometimes when I have customers I look in the mirror that runs the length of the bed. I see myself with these guys with flabby old bodies and think they shouldn't be able to buy mine. My face isn't too good still with the acne but my body's nice. It's brown and delicate looking. It doesn't seem right but it's best not to think about stuff like that.

Most of the guys are very respectful because it's part of Japanese tradition. Geishas and all that. I remember back to the time with Will from the red sports car and realised these guys would never do a thing like that. Then the work doesn't seem so bad.

On my days off I start going dancing at Akasaka Mitsuke. The disco's called Mugen. I find it because I'm near there one day having coffee and a black American guy starts talking to me. Having sex with loads of different guys every night makes you lonely. Sometimes I try to get a customer to fall in love with me because I'm lonely. So when Chad starts being friendly and telling me about his band, I go to watch him. He's the drummer.

I don't tell him about my work. I sleep with him the first night and after that he starts being like a boyfriend. I tell him I teach English in Yokohama. It only lasts for about three weeks because after that a girl who works in a Tokyo bathhouse, who I'd told what I really did, came to Mugen and told Chad.

'I thought he knew, honey,' she tells me.

After that, everything changes with him. The next time after he finds out, when Mugen closes, he says what he really feels like is going to a hotel and having a special night with me. He takes me to the most expensive hotel in Tokyo.

'You been holdin' out on me baby. You din't say you was a workin' gal. I used to run workin' gals back home. Don't worry me none at all, honey. Just means we can have a goooooo time.'

So at the hotel he orders this big meal and a maid brings it in on a trolley. Then he orders a massage for both of us. He doesn't even ask me — I've already sussed out who's paying — he just picks up the phone like he owns the place.

Two big Japanese women come up and I can see in their eyes they don't like us. I've already noticed Japanese feel superior to black people and Koreans. Anyone who isn't Japanese or white really. Because we won the war so we're sort of all right. Chad seems happy enough but the woman I've got pummels me until I'm almost blue. I have to tell her to stop. It's like she's punishing me for being with a black guy.

After the massage we have sex and he pumps away at me. He doesn't come and the outside skin of my vagina starts to hurt because it's so dry down there. I'm not excited at all. He doesn't do anything to even try to give me pleasure.

'I don't really like it when you hump me,' I say when I can't stand it any more and I'm so sore I could jump out the window.

He stops and supports himself on his hands and looks down at me offended. But it doesn't look real to me. Like he's acting.

'What're you sayin', honey, that I don't love ya? Is that what you sayin'? Is it? 'Cause if that's what you sayin' you wrong. Cain't you see how much I love you by how long I'm making love wit you? Cain't you see that? If you cain't see that I don't even know why I bother wit you.'

'It's not that, it's just that I'm sore. It hurts.'

'Well, if you wanna do work where yo fuckin' guys all night long course yo gonna be sore. What you 'spect me to do? Huh? What you 'spect me to do 'bout that?'

He goes back to the job and keeps pumping away while I stare at the ceiling. After a while I feel like I'm on the ceiling and only my body's on the bed.

When we leave the hotel the next morning, while I'm paying the bill, he goes and buys me a rose.

'This is just to show how special y'are and how much I loves you, honey.'

Part of me knows he only did it because I'm paying. The other part of me wants to believe him. Needs to believe him.

Next time I see him he makes a call to America and talks to a girl he knows there.

'You know how much I loves you, honey. You know I do.' And when he says that to her he looks me right in the eyes. He keeps looking at me until he hangs up.

'I really loves that girl. She used to work for me in the States. That's how much I can love a workin' gal.'

'I thought you said you loved me?'

'I do, honey. I do. It's jus' that I loves her more. But I could love you that much too. Jus' depends, you know. Depends how good y'are to me. How much you show you loves me.'

He's a quick mover, and that's lucky for me, because I'm so lonely he could have had me if he'd taken a bit more time.

'You know, I really need some cash. I told you how much they pay in that crap joint. I don't need much, well, it won't be much to you, right? All the dough you pullin' in. I wish I could make that kinda cash, but guys just cain't.'

'How much do you need to borrow?'

'Borrow? Honey, I don't wanna borrow no money. I thought seein' as how you got so much more'n me, you could share a bit around like. I'm yo man, ain't I?'

'No.' And when I say it I pull away from him like he's some kind of spider. That's when I know he's a creepy user and doesn't care about me at all. I start walking faster away from him down the street.

'Sorry, honey, I didn't mean to hurt yo feelings. I was jus' kiddin'. I wasn't serious.' And he comes hurrying up after me.

'It didn't sound like a joke to me. Why should I give you money?'

'I just wanted ta see what you'd say, tha's all. It was a joke, okay?'

We finish the night together because I can't stand an argument or someone to cut me into shreds right now. That's why I don't tell him how devastated I am. Now I finally know for sure he doesn't care about me at all. I'm funny like that. I'll do everything to convince myself that someone loves me until I can't hide the truth from myself any more. Sometimes lying to yourself is easier. But once you know for sure, no amount of talking is going to stop you knowing what's really what. I don't go to Mugen any more.

I hadn't realised how important Chad had been until then. Thinking he loved me was just enough to keep me going. I needed to believe it. If he doesn't love me, no-one does. And if no-one loves me I'm in a sea of loneliness so big and deep and black I can't stay afloat.

My days off are the worst because I never know where to go. A couple of weeks ago I went to see *Hair*, the musical. After the show, I met a guy in a coffee shop. A teacher. I went home with him. The minute I walked into his lounge room, I took my clothes off. I knew why I was there, so why pretend to get all romantic. He was impressed. He thought I was a modern girl. He also thought I was eighteen and was pretty shocked when he found out I was the same age as his students.

Tonight I decide to go to Luna Park. It was the best part of being a kid. When I get there, just the sight of that big old smiling clown's mouth you go through to get in makes me feel happy. But this time I go inside and have a few rides but then don't know what else to do. The rides look smaller and the paint's chipping on everything. I've known for years there aren't any ghosts in the ghost train but when you go with someone else you can scream and pretend. In the tunnel of love I go in a boat with a couple kissing in the front seat. I sit there watching, wishing she was me. Even chugging to a peak on the scenic railway and falling into darkness doesn't make my tummy jump any more. I keep trying to feel excited but it won't come. I leave.

Outside a man pulls up in his car and asks me 'how much'. I don't know why I say \$20 but I do. I don't need the money. He takes me to the Park Royal Motel in Sydney Road but I don't know anything about getting the money first. He's at me all night until I can barely walk. I don't even think about it because what's the point. I just hope he'll get tired and fall asleep but he wants to get his money's worth even though he hasn't paid yet. He even wants to watch close up where my wee comes out like some little kid, then shouts at me when a bit splashes on him. In the morning he drops me near home and when he asks for my phone number and I say I probably don't want to see him again, he won't pay. The whole night has been so horrible, but this makes it even worse.

It's about 5.30am when I creep into the Chief's bedroom where Jane, I hope, is fast asleep beside him. She's home from the hospital for the weekend, which is why I'd decided to go out instead of stay home like I usually do. I crouch right beside him and whisper into his ear, 'I've been raped.'

I'm very honest usually, but I do lie sometimes. I hate liars myself, more than anything.

He leaps up and takes me into the lounge room.

'Don't you ever come into my room while Jane's here. Do you understand? Ever.'

Didn't he hear what I'd said? I just look at him and start crying.

'Now, what's all this about?'

'I've been raped,' I say again. My lips are trembling.

'By who?' He's all business, like I'm in the witness box.

'I was walking near the Yarra and some guys came up and raped me.'

'How many?'

'About five.'

'What do you mean about five. You were raped and you don't know by how many.'

'It was dark.'

'Where did they rape you?'

'There by the river.'

'When?'

'All night.'

'Then why aren't your clothes wet?' he says, feeling the back of my dress. 'If it was night the grass would have been damp.'

'They took my clothes off.'

'You're lying.'

'Why would I say it happened if it didn't?' A little 'there, there' would do. This isn't turning out the way I thought at all.

'I don't believe you. I'm going back to bed.'

I cry myself to sleep. Quietly, so I won't wake Jane.

It's after the night with Chad that the great big depression starts again. It isn't so much because of him as because I'm so lonely. There are the girls I work with but I don't see them outside work much. Charity leaves the flat to work in Hokkaido. I think we're friends, but after she leaves I find out she's stolen my favorite dress and a pair of bathers that she kept saying how much she liked. I know it's only clothes she's stolen, and well, I did steal them myself, but that was from a shop. I'd never steal from a person, especially someone I know and like. I feel bad when I find out.

I keep thinking more and more that I don't have anything to go home to. I don't have anything that I like here either. Not only that. The great big, black hole that's my loneliness gets bigger and I don't know how to fill it up. I don't have a clue. All I want is rest. I want to die just so I can rest.

Even I'm getting tired with overdoses but I'm too much of a coward to do it any other way. I hate pain more than anything. I wonder how people can hang themselves or jump off bridges and I know they're braver than I'll ever be. I only want to die quietly and quickly without any pain so I can rest.

So, I think about what to do. I know sleeping pills by themselves don't work, so I have to think of something extra. I'd heard that if you're in a really cold place, like the snow, you die of exposure. So I decide to go to Mount Fuji and take my overdose there. I know there's snow there because of all the postcards I've seen. I think with the pills and snow, I've got a good chance.

So, on my next day off, I catch a taxi up as high on Mount Fuji as you can go. But when I get there, there's no snow. I pay the taxi, which costs a fortune and stand outside the hotel it's dropped me at and start laughing. I book in, because even though I can see the funny side of going to Mount Fuji in the middle of winter and finding no snow, I decide I haven't got it in me to be alive for another day. It's late in the afternoon and the sun has been shining all day even though it's winter. It's been a beautiful day but that only makes me feel worse because I know I should feel happy looking at all the beautiful scenery. I don't. I must be the most miserable person on the planet.

Before I take the overdose I phone a few people in Australia. I phone Mother and tell her what I'm going to do but she's no help.

'What do you want to do that for?'

'I'm unhappy.'

'But why are you unhappy? You've got everything to live for.'

It goes on like that for a bit but in the end I wish I hadn't called her. It doesn't make me feel any different.

Even though I haven't written or spoken to Simone since I'd sent her my poem in Malaysia more than a year ago, I call her. I still feel that she's deep enough to get what's happening to me without me having to say. Even though she said she didn't get my poem, I know on some level she felt it. Some people just know without you having to say. I want to believe she understands me. If I'm wrong I'm completely alone and there's no hope and no point in anything. I'm crying when I call.

'I know this is a really terrible thing to do when you're so far away...' I can barely get the words out I'm crying so much.

'What is it? Just calm down and take a deep breath and tell me what's wrong.'

I tell her what I've been doing in Japan and that I want to die.

'Tell me what I can do. Anything. Why don't you come home? Just jump on the next plane and we'll meet you at the airport. Can you manage that?'

She's being so nice it makes me cry more until I can't talk at all. I can't get on a plane and go home. I can't explain to her why. I can't even explain it to myself. Because I can't and because she's being so nice, I hang up.

I think of ringing Joanne but she's so unpredictable. Sometimes when you just phone or come to her door, she shouts at you because she's having a panic attack or can't bear to see anyone just then. It's late and she could shout at me for waking her up. I can't risk that.

Instead I ring Carol but don't tell her my plans. I think what I've just done to Simone is really terrible. I imagine how I'd feel if I was so far away and someone said they were going to kill themselves and then just hung up. So, I tell Carol what I'm doing in Japan and how unhappy I am. I think she might be able to say something that will change how I feel. She tries but I already know there's really nothing anyone can do or say. I tell her I'll probably come home soon and hang up.

It's freezing out there even if it isn't snowing. I think there's a good chance I'll die of exposure if I go up as high as I can where it's colder. So I take a gob full of sleeping pills in my room and then go out and start walking up the mountain. I have to climb through some barbed wire fences and up through trees. I walk until I can't walk any more and then lay down and go to sleep feeling pretty happy.

I wake up and I'm so cold I know I'm not dead. So cold I could die. Ha ha. The cold hurts. It hurts like crazy and I can't stand it. I have to get somewhere warm. I think again how I'd rather be dead than cold any day. So I stumble down the mountain and can't walk properly because you're pretty groggy when you're coming out of an overdose, like you're drunk. Anyway, I'm trying to get back through the barbed wire fences and I keep falling onto them instead and nearly poke my eye out on a branch of a tree. By the time I come to a road it seems like I've been stumbling along for hours and I must look a sight because when a car comes along the driver looks horrified, gets another car to stop too and they both take me back to the hotel which seems like it's the only place on the mountain. They put me in a hot bath and it's the best and worst bath I've ever had.

'Not too hot ... slow ... warm ...' I can hear bits and pieces in Japanese but I don't know exactly what they're saying because I keep drifting in and out of consciousness, so that doesn't help in the translating either and when I get in it's warm and hurts like crazy but feels sooo good, too. I wonder if they think if it's too hot I'll crack like a block of ice. When I get used to it they put more hot water in and it's the same again, painful but like heaven and I can feel it warming my bones.

The next thing I wake up and I'm in a hospital somewhere. Tom Tanaka's standing by the bed.

'You try to kill yourself. This very serious thing in Japan.'

'No, someone gave me something in a drink.' I don't want to get into trouble.

'Who? Who give you something?'

'Some boys. I went for a walk. I don't remember anything after that.'

'The doctor here say you try to kill yourself. Very bad. Someone caw for you.'

'Nobody knows I'm here. Who?'

'Two people caw. Someone from Oostraria and someone here, some boy. They caw back rater.'

Again all the drifting in and out of consciousness. I like it because it gives me a rest from the situation. I know I'm in trouble. The Japanese think it's fine to go suiciding in planes when they're feeling dishonored but when a westerner does it she must be crazy.

I get back to the flat in Yokohama spaced out but patched up. The Australian call had come from Simone, whose mum had got onto an Australian operator and together they'd traced the call after I'd hung up. They said it took a couple of hours. She must have been really freaked out to do that. I guess she wasn't to know our family have suicide attempts like most people have holidays. I guess Simone told Tom.

The other call was from Chad. They'd found his number in my bag and told him. He called me back again all right.

'Ah cain't believe you love me so much you tried to kill yo'self. I din't know you loved me that much, baby.'

'It wasn't actually because of you, Chad. I was just really depressed.'

'Oh, come on now, baby. Yo don't have to lie to me. Come on out and see us when yo's your old self. I cain't come visit 'cause I'm workin' and by the time I can you'll prob'ly be home, right? So there ain't no point. But I loves you, baby. You hear that?'

It's no surprise that the hospital bills are gigantic and I go back to work to pay for them. I stay another month before going home.

I don't want to go to Mugen to see Chad again, but I do. Deep down I know he doesn't care about me but I need it so much I convince myself I could've been wrong about him. I just can't be so unlovable. He must have felt something. There's no-one else. And nothing else. When I see him he brags to his friends how I tried to kill myself over him. He tells me he loves me while rooting me so dry it hurts. His visits are a mindfuck. My ears hear the only thing I need to hear — that someone cares about me — while all my other senses tell me he's a pimp and it's a lie. I do my best to ignore the humiliation that dumps on me each time I leave him to go back to work.

The day I leave Japan, I'm at Chad's flat saying goodbye and the bass player in his band comes up to me when Chad's in the loo.

'He's bad shit, gurl. Yo' take care o' yourself and stay away from him when you leave.'

Then he goes away and I look after him with my mouth hanging open. All along there'd been someone who cared about me enough to say that but I didn't see it. I chose the wrong guy. I'm always choosing the wrong guys.

Simone had rung again in Yokohama and invited me to stay at her house when I came home.

She's at the airport being really kind when I arrive. It's embarrassing after what I've done. It's one thing to do it to your own family, but I can see for Simone and her mum it's been a big stressful thing.

When we get to her house her mum hugs me and takes both my hands.

'You can be my other daughter. You'll always be part of this family. Do you know that?'

I want it more than anything.

While I'm there we eat hot meals around their table with napkins and a tablecloth and chat about our day together. We take walks after dinner and laugh at the funny ways of all the dogs they breed while we brush their coats before they go to a show and win prizes. Simone and me stay up late at night and tell each other all the things no one else will understand and she quotes Shakespeare to me because ordinary words won't do when you have deep things to say.

She talks to me about her life and tells me how she felt about her childhood that she's never told anyone else before and I think we really could be like sisters.

I've been away three months. The university year is about to start and if I'm going, I have to decide where and what to study and apply in a hurry. I won't get credit for anything I've done but I should get in almost anything except law or medicine with my high matric score. Last year I'd picked up Japanese quick enough so I think maybe I could be good at that. Simone finds that the best Japanese course is at the Australian National University in Canberra, where Pommy is. What a coincidence. I'm still not sure whether or not to go. I like the idea of being here, part of a normal family.

Then something happens that decides for me.

After I've been at Simone's house a week, her mum comes home from church. I've stayed home. I've bought a lot of stylish clothes in Japan and I'm wearing a casual but elegant number that makes me look conservative because I don't want to look like a slut. It's a knitted suit with a skirt that comes down to my calves.

'Just looking at you now, no one would ever think you're any different from the young girls in church today. You could be one of them, you look so sweet.'

That's when I know I can't be part of her family or like her daughter or one of the girls in her church because I'm not any of those things and know I never ever can be. No matter how much she or I or anyone else wants it to be true.

I decide to go to Canberra. I'm tired. Tired of chasing my tail, tired of deciding what to do with my life and not belonging anywhere. The thought of being near my own family, however disconnected we are, is what I need but I can't go unless I have a reason. Maybe it's not just a coincidence that of all the places in Australia, the best Japanese course is there. You don't run to the bosom of your family when your family's like mine, but in some part of me I yearn to be with my own kind and relax. I want to be taken care of but Pommy says there isn't room in the house she found in Yarralumla. She lives with Jacqui and Christian and Betty and Nicole. Betty and Nicki had moved with Mother from Brisbane to Canberra more than a year ago.

I organise a room in a student residence on campus.

At dawn the day before I'm due to leave Sydney, I drive down to the beach at Rose Bay where Fabian lives. Even though we'd never slept together, I'd fantasised more about him in Japan than anyone else. In my head I play the dice game about whether to visit him or see how hard it is to drown myself. The drowning game wins. I haven't tried that before.

The plan is to swim so far out I won't be able to swim back.

I'm so far from the shore the beach bins look like dots. I imagine going under and not being able to breathe. I look around at the expanse of sea behind me. Suddenly, I panic and turn around to swim back but the current's against me. I think I won't make it back, but I keep swimming even though at every stroke the undertow pulls me back. Sometimes I give in to it, stop swimming and flounder around, losing all hope of reaching the shore. Then the urge to swim comes again out of nowhere. Breast stroke one arm after the other like I'm in a trance, not really having faith that I'll make it but blindly going on anyway. When I can feel sand underneath my feet I turn around to look back. It's choppy out there.

I decide I don't want to drown.

I have to drive past Fabian's house to get back to Lyn's, so I drop in anyway. It's very awkward because he wonders why I've turned up all wet at his parents house at seven in the morning. I stay for a cup of coffee then get out of there fast. I decide I'm never visiting him again.

COMING OF AGE



In Canberra I discover Mother's gone to jail for social security fraud. Last year she ended up getting sickness benefits in more than a hundred different names. She's gone in for grand larceny, diddling the government of more than \$50,000, but I know for a fact it's a lot more than that. The earliest she can get out is twelve months and that will be up later in the year.

But the most amazing thing I find out when I get there, is that Jacqui and Pommy are living together. And I mean living together, sleeping in the same bed. You could've knocked me over with a feather. They don't come right out and say anything but the first night I go to visit, Jacqui kisses Pommy on the mouth when she goes to bed. I just stare.

'Goodnight, honey,' she says. Honey! Pommy and I look at each other.

'Am I making of that what I'm supposed to make of it?'

'Depends what you make of it,' Pommy says.

'Well, it's very hard to say.' We both keep looking, me amazed and she nonchalant. We're trying hard not to smile until we both give up and burst out laughing.

'How did it happen?'

'Don't ask me. We'd been staying up late and talking almost all night for the first week after we got back from Surfers and then one night one thing led to another.'

'What do you mean one thing led to another? Who made the first move?'

'Well, Jacqui. Well, no, we both did really. Maybe more Jacqui but it was really both of us. Jacqui says she's known since she was a kid that she's gay. I'm not but I just really love Jac. She's fantastic with Christian. He adores her.'

Now Jacqui's feelings for me over all these years becomes clear. She'd been in love with me and I hadn't even realised. I'm happy they seem so happy with each other. But I'm a bit jealous too. Like Pommy's stolen the only real school friend I've ever had.

They both have jobs at the Nigerian High Commission. Pommy's the Commissioner's private secretary and Jacqui works in the office. I feel really proud of Pommy that she's got such a good job. It's all because she taught herself shorthand and typing from those books. All by herself. How amazing. Not only is the pay good, but Pommy can finish at 4 o'clock and pick Christian up from the babysitter's.

I visit Pommy almost every day. I practically live there. I think since I was a kid I've thought of her as a substitute mum. Wherever she lives is where the family is. And where no one else in the family takes care of anyone else, whenever she can afford it, she pays for Mick and Peter to fly up from Melbourne during the school holidays. She pays for them to go to the movies or bowling because having lived in the convent she has an idea how monotonous life in a boarding school can be. Even now Mick's finished school and is working as a trainee psychiatric nurse she still helps him with his ticket to come up because we're all he's got.

Mick's a funny kid. He and Pommy are Betty's favorites. Last holidays when he was home, she told me how when they were driving to Sydney to visit Mother in jail, they were going past Lake George around midnight when Mick stopped the car.

'He started telling that story, you know the one about the escaped mental patient, I can't even bring myself to tell it and ...'

'Which one? The one where the man leaves his wife and goes for petrol down the road ...'

'Don't, Barbara. Clearly you know the one I'm talking about and ...'

'But I forget what happens, isn't it when the wife hears a thud thud on the roof of the car and sees blood dripping ...'

'Barbara, now stop it. Stop. You're just as bad as your brother. Anyway, I begged him to stop and I put my fingers in my ears so I couldn't hear the little devil but he just laughed. He was having a merry old time scaring the living daylight of his Auntie Betty. Oooh, he's a naughty boy.' She giggles like a schoolgirl remembering.

I only have a few childhood memories of Mick. He was always the skinny blond kid smiling in family photos. I struggle to remember something, anything, but I only have two memories.

The first is when he started school at St Anthony's in Melbourne when we were living in the Hollywood Grove house Lionel had bought for Mother. At school he found me at morning playlunch and said he had to go to the toilet but couldn't get his buttons undone. I wanted to help but he was too embarrassed to have me fiddling with his fly in the playground and I couldn't go into the boys' toilet with him.

'I'm going home. I've gotta go now.' He was very upset.

'You can't go on your own. It's too far. You'll be late and get into trouble. You'll get the strap.'

'I can't wait. I gotta go now, Barb. Please come. I don't know the way home and I gotta go.' He was clutching himself and crying. He started walking out the school gates even though he didn't know the way home. I had to decide fast what to do. I knew we'd both be late if I went and I'd get the strap too. The nuns were vicious and no excuse was ever

good enough. I ran after him, grabbed his hand and made him run all the way which wasn't hard because he was busting. When we got back we were late. I was amazed because neither of us got the strap.

My only other memory of him is when Pommy and I came home from living in the country while she was waiting for a place at the convent. Mick and Peter used to go camping and shooting rabbits with Mother's boyfriend, Ken, who'd just bought them both .22 rifles. Mick was telling us how he'd shot his first rabbit that weekend. He was very excited.

'Better be careful you don't end up sniffing and blinking hanging around with Ken,' Pommy said.

'Yeah,' I butted in. And we both danced around him pretending to be Ken sniffing and blinking.

'Shut up. Just shut up, you two. What would you know?'

'Look, see how he's blinking already. Did you see that? It's already started.' Being vulnerable for us was like blood to a shark. Pommy and I circled, waiting for the kill.

Mick was a pretty happy kid who hardly ever got upset. But this time he went and threw himself on his bed and started crying. He must have been only about twelve. I hadn't seen him cry since he couldn't get his pants undone that first day at school.

'Shut up, you fuckin' bastards. Ken's the only one who's ever done anything nice for us. I love him and I don't care what you fuck faces say. Go away. Just leave me alone.'

No one ever used that word in our family and it hit us like a hammer. We're embarrassed that he'd said the word love, and that made us very ashamed. Then Mother and the four other kids ganged up on us and said everything had been so much better in the house since we'd been away. We could hear Mick wailing in the bedroom. We slunk off and couldn't look at each other again that night because of what we'd done to Mick.

Mick became editor of the school newspaper when he finished matric last year. Wow. Imagine my brother an editor. He and Peter both think of the Yarralumla house as home when they visit, just like we all do. Even Bloss, who's living in Adelaide with a boyfriend, comes to visit like it's home since Mother was put in jail.

When I visit I never help cook or clean or bring food. I treat it like home. Pommy and I play backgammon, Yahtzee, canasta or Rickety Kate like there's no tomorrow. We play non-stop for hours, sometimes until one or two in the morning. Your move, do you want to double, hurry up, fast game's a good game, I won, you just got good dice, 75 to 57, don't cheat, I'm not cheating, what's that on the floor, you didn't have that point covered, just shut up and move, it's your go, fast game's a good game.

Sometimes I stay the night and it's warm and cosy like a home. Betty or Jacqui cook. Pommy and I can talk late into the night but I have to be careful not to win a debate about our opinions.

'I know you're wrong, I just can't work out how,' she'll say.

Then she'll go to bed. I hate it when she suddenly goes to bed on me.

Jacqui wakes Pommy up at 8.30 and gets Christian ready to go to the babysitter's house while Pommy meditates for twenty minutes. She's started doing transcendental mediation twice a day. She gets in a few quick games of backgammon with me before going off to work, which is only five minutes away. They come home at lunchtime and play all through lunch. At night we eat dinner at the dining room table while we keep playing and everyone else eats dinner on their knees watching telly. The only game Pommy doesn't like is chess because I always win and she doesn't like to lose. She says it's because chess is too slow.

It's because I'm good at chess that I meet this guy who's a member of the Labor Party at uni.

In college I live in a little room with just a bed and a desk. There's a common room where you can go and socialise but I don't know anyone here until I meet Andrew. He's playing chess and I watch while I wait for a poetry reading. A.D. Hope, who I studied for matric, is giving a reading and to me he's like a superstar. The Labor guy is winning every game. I hear his name is Andrew. I ask if I can play the winner. When my turn comes I can't remember where the knights and bishops go. I haven't played for a while and I have a mixed up memory for things like that. He looks at me and sighs because he knows he's going to have a very boring game. When I start winning a few pieces, people come over to look because he's the champion. I check mate him in twenty minutes.

'You're a bloody hustler. Set up again.'

I win the next game, too. By then there's an even bigger crowd. I have time for one more game and I win that as well and then have to go or I'll miss A.D. Hope. The other guys in the student Labor Party are ribbing Andrew about losing to a ring-in and a girl at that although they don't say that part because if guys aren't feminists the gorgeous feminists won't sleep with them.

'You can't go now. I've gotta have a chance to beat you.'

'We've played three. I said I had to go at 9 o'clock. I'll play some other time.'

I don't remember the poetry reading because all I can think about is how I'd been a star. I hadn't met anybody at uni before then. I hardly ever go to the common room because kids there all seem to know each other and I'm not the fitting-in type.

After that night people say hello and ask me to play chess. People know my name. I can't say I'm popular but I'm not invisible here any more.

Andrew doesn't live on campus but in a student house. The first time he takes me there I see a close up black and white photo of a cunt on his wall. I've learnt saying cunt rather than anything else is the go because if you can call a penis a cock why not a vagina a cunt? Neither of them sound too flash to me, though. Anyway, when I see it, I laugh.

'I don't know why you're laughing. It's beautiful. Don't you think a woman's genitalia are beautiful?'

'Yeah, but not necessarily in close up.'

‘Why not? That’s one of the most beautiful parts of a woman.’

I back off because I know this is some kind of new thinking that I haven’t heard of yet. I have to keep on the look out for things I’m not supposed to say that will make people think I don’t know how you’re supposed to think. They’re thinking of new things to think every five minutes and people get very upset when you don’t know them. It’s very tiring. I still think dicks are disgusting but I know I’m not supposed to say that.

I’m not attracted to Andrew because he’s hairy and pudgy but he’s very interesting. I tell him about the work I did in Japan and he thinks I’m a new age woman. It’s cool to be a prostitute because like I’d learnt from Jane back in the Sydney house, they’re the only ones who are really up front about sex.

With the money I made in Japan I’m taking flying lessons in a little two-seater Cessna and I buy an orange Datsun 120Y.

One day I’m washing my car out the front of his place.

‘Imagine people seeing you washing this thing and thinking you’re some spoilt little daddy’s girl who’s been given a car for Christmas. They’d never dream what you did to buy that car,’ he says. Labor Party people think things like that are funny.

I like him because he accepts me for who I am.

Andrew has met Gough Whitlam through his connections with the Party. He’s studying history and politics. He’s always talking about Left wing theories and the working class. He tells me a bit about the history of unions and I tell him about when I was a barmaid and the hotel union went on strike. I hated the way the crowd turned into a mob and people running the show made it so uncomfortable for others like me to vote against the strike. They’d have people walking around booing anyone who was voting a different way to everyone else. But Andrew always argues with a lot of enthusiasm and I like to listen to the way he talks. He’s in a debating team too and knows how to win arguments. Just like chess. We play often after those first three times. I never win again.

Andrew impresses me in a lot of ways but not enough to sleep with him. Not only am I not attracted, not a stumbling block in itself, I’m all sexed out after Japan. Sex seems like the best way to spoil anything that’s pure and wholesome and good.

When I think about going back to Japan, I think of the undertow pulling me back when I tried my drowning experiment. It’s the only way I can explain how I feel about Japan. It’s my undertow. It pulls me back even while I swim toward some shore I don’t know — I can’t see or imagine where uni will lead, only that it has to be some place better than where I am. Japan’s like the open sea and uni’s like the shore of a strange country. They’re two parts of me struggling to win.

I go back during the half-year break. I make quite a bit of money and only stay for a few weeks before I’m deported because I don’t have a work permit. They raid the place I’m working in and send us all to an immigration detention centre. It’s like a prison with bars. We’re allowed to go home after a few days but are told we can’t come back to Japan for a year after that.

Around third term, I want to go again. Mother’s home from jail. I decide to get a false passport in a different name and go anyway. Mother’s the expert and she tells me how. I go to the state library and look up someone with an unusual name born around 1956. It gives all the information you need to apply for a passport — mother’s maiden name, the hospital where the person was born, the middle name. I look the names up in the phone book and ring to find out if the girl has already got a passport by saying we met overseas last year. But, in the end, I get scared of getting caught and Mother says to use Jenny’s married name. Mother says she’s never going to go overseas being as how she’s buried in the backblocks of Heckenberg in Sydney with three kids.

I dye my hair blonde, really blonde, and wear thick glasses for the fake passport photo.

Mother keeps gambling on the nags and even spending the rent money that Betty has made at the telephone exchange.

Betty gets angry and instead of calling her Tub she gets the full Great Big Tub of Lard. It’s hard to know why Betty’s stayed living with our family for more than a decade because she gets nothing but grief. Betty’s dream is to go to Europe and the Mother Country. Mother tells her when her ship comes in she’ll take her on a Tour of the Continent.

I don’t think Betty believes it, even though she lives in hope because Mother can surprise you with anything. But I think she stays because Betty is a born worrier and Mother cruises through disaster after disaster with a strange kind of upbeat ennui that would put any French existentialist to shame.

Like the night Mother and Betty are driving home from work when Mother, being a lazy girl at the wheel, doesn’t turn it enough going round a roundabout and the tyre hits a kerb, which rolls the car across the grass. It lands upright after rolling two times or four, depending on whether you believe Mother or Betty. The engine’s still running, so Mother continues driving home as though nothing’s happened.

‘You don’t think perhaps you should stop a moment do you, Patricia?’ Betty had said. I can see her dazed with big black curls all akimbo around her face and tufts of grass sticking out of the doors and the windscreen popped out entirely.

I can see Mother pondering the point for a second before answering. She gets this sincere look on her face, and there’s a whiff of sheepishness as well, because she knows when it comes to how normal people deal with crisis and little upsets she’s a bit behind the eight ball.

‘What for?’ Mother really wants to know. Maybe she’s missed something.

Well, even I can see there was no reason really, except that some people like to take a breather, to moan and mourn

and cry over spilt milk. Mother's a different breed altogether and I think her emotional removal from disaster is a comfort to Betty.

She was having kittens when the police pulled them over a few minutes later because one tail light wasn't working. Not Mother. She put on her telephone voice and thanked him for letting her know and off they tootled. He didn't even notice the windscreen was missing.

I can't help thinking Betty's nerves must be ragged by everyday life living with us. It's been years since anyone's been caught, but there's always the worry that someone will be carted off to jail at any minute for shopping. Not long after the car incident Mother scooped up a bottle of perfume and shoved it down the deep crevasse of her cleavage as she sailed past a makeup counter as she and Betty were leaving Myers. Mother's bag was already loaded with stolen booty.

'Patricia, put that back. You'll get us arrested. Put it back this minute. I'm not walking with you. I don't know you. I'm not with you. Now put it back.'

'It's too late now. If I put it back they'll know I stole it.' She was right. It was already too late because an old lady shopper had seen the theft and started calling out to anyone who'd listen.

'She stole that. She put it down her neck. I saw. She just picked it up and put it down her dress.'

Betty was beside herself and began hurrying away from Mother, but Mother kept sailing on out of the store with her. Instead of trying to get away, she planted herself at the bus stop right outside the door waiting for a bus home. A store security guard came out with the old woman who pointed out the wicked thief.

'That's her. That's the one.'

Mother denied it and without a body search, which was either illegal or they weren't prepared to get into it given the size of the job, there was no proof, was there?

I think Betty loves Mother but finds living with her a trial. She tries to keep as far out of our funny business, specially shopping, as she can, given that she lives in the same house.

We often go shopping as a family. It didn't start out being a family affair. Pommy was the first to do it. She'd started when she was in first year high school. Mother had tried to stop her when she got caught and the social worker came and had a talk to Mother at home. She talked to all of us and then told Mother what a great job she was doing with us because we all had individual personalities. The five different fathers were never mentioned.

'If you get caught shoplifting again, after I'm finished with you, you won't be able to sit down for a week,' Mother told Pommy. How she expected that to do any good when she'd never laid a hand on us in our lives, I don't know.

When Pommy kept doing it and I joined her and so did everybody else, Mother thought if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. So that's what she did. She's a great foil because she's so big. You can stand in front of her while she holds the bag open and you put anything in that bag you want and no one will see. Once I put a gigantic electric juicer in there and no one saw even though the cord kept getting tangled up in the straps and there were lots of attachments to get in as well.

But more often than not Pommy and I go on our own. Usually we fill up the back seat and the boot of her little yellow Renault. Lately, it's become hard in Canberra because there are only two shopping centres and we're worried they might get to know our faces. So sometimes we make a trip to Sydney and really go wild because no one will know us here. We come back with a car full. At home we add up all the tickets and it's thousands and thousands of dollars. It's mainly clothes but also kitchen stuff, toys and even a marble chess set.

I'm going okay at uni, even though inside I'm still a bit of a mess. I start crying a fair bit again and don't even bother to try to stop it. Sometimes it feels good.

When the Chief is sure the girls are asleep, we go to bed. It's like we're married in a way. In bed he asks me to do things that get more confusing as time goes on. He never lets me kiss him on the mouth. That's what I want the most. The more I can't do it, the more I want to. I try not to think about it.

After we have sex, I have to go to the lounge room couch. The girls aren't allowed to find me in their daddy's bed when they wake up.

There are other rules too. Once he comes home late and drags me out of bed. He pulls furniture out from the wall and runs his finger along the skirting board searching for dust.

'You're a disgusting pig,' he booms. 'You don't do anything around here. Didn't your mother teach you how to clean a fucking house?'

He makes me get the vacuum cleaner and clean until he falls asleep. I'm cleaning the skirting boards and keep looking up towards the stairs to see if he's coming back down. I imagine him in the army. He reminded me of the sergeant on Gomer Pyle. He was always yelling. In the morning the Chief says he's sorry and calls me 'Pet'.

But there are other times when he talks to me like a friend. That's what I like the most. Also I feel like a lover sometimes, even like his wife. But I know I'm not really any of those things.

I don't know anybody in the neighborhood. I'm a pretty talkative kind of person and I like company. It drives me crazy not having anyone to talk to during the day. Nita's at kindy a lot. I have Kate at home but even then the girls go to their grandma's house most weekends. Anyway, you can't really chat with little kids no matter how much you like them. One day when I feel lonely I go to see the lady next door but when she says I should have people my own age to talk to I cry and neither of us knows what to do.

But sometimes when I feel like the Chief might really love me, I don't feel so bad.

One day he comes home in his suit and says he wants to do something special. He says he's hungry and sets

the dining room table with a knife and fork.

'What are we having?' I ask.

'A delicacy,' he says. Then he starts taking my clothes off. He puts me on the table.

He's still in his suit and tie.

It feels strange but you'd have to know how soft he touches me to know why I think maybe he does love me. He starts at my toes and sucks every one of them. Then he strokes my legs with the tips of his fingers so soft you'd hardly know he was even there. Then he gets up near my clitoris, but he doesn't actually touch it. He goes everywhere but there. Softly, with his fingers and then his tongue. Just when I want him to touch it so badly I put my hips in the air to get closer to just the tip of his tongue, he comes towards me, but only just, and touches it so I nearly die with this tingling, flying feeling that spreads through my whole body. Then, just when he thinks I might come, he stops and goes around and around but not touching it again for a while. Then he starts all over again. That's when I think the Chief knows me better than anyone. He's listening to the sounds I make and knows exactly when to stop and when to start again so I won't come. But every time he does it, I get more and more excited. It might sound like I'm a piece of food on the table but it isn't like that at all. For me it's like I'm a piano and he's playing me. When I finally come that night, there's so much cum on the table it's a little puddle. It seems to him like the most delicious taste in the world. After we finish, he lets me sleep in his bed with my head on his shoulder. We breathe together like we're one person instead of two.

But after that night things go back to normal. I still try to kiss him but he won't let me.

I get more lonely at the Chief's house. If you pile lonely on top of lonely you start to go really crazy. I get so lonely and crazy that on weekends I go out and just have sex with anyone who wants me. They don't even have to say it. I know that's what guys want from girls. The Chief says it all the time. 'Sex is what it's all about. Just get as much as you can, Pet.' He means life. Sex is what life's all about. If he says it once he says it a hundred times. He's usually right about most things. I don't know that he's completely right about that in every case though. I mean, take me for instance, I think about other things. When I think about the Chief, I don't always think, oh, I wish he would root me. I think about other things.

My worst night with the Chief has nothing to do with sex. He has to go to a dinner with his work mates at a place called Lazar's restaurant. It sounds so posh. Lazar's. He'd invited Belinda but she wasn't supposed to come until seven. We ended up having sex in the afternoon when he came home from work early, which he does when he doesn't go for his Friday night drink.

This is one of the days when we just have pretty normal kind of sex. We do that sometimes. That's when he treats me like I reckon you might treat a wife. It's normal and kind of quiet sex. If you leave out when I come because I'm pretty loud.

It's one of those times when he takes a long time teasing me until I want to come so bad it's like everything I have on the inside rushes to my skin. Then he stops and teases me again. When I come, it feels like my pores and heart are bursting open.

'You're so beautiful. Do you know that? I hope you come back and see me when you're 28, maybe 30. You'll be so gorgeous.'

'Why then? What's so special about being that old?'

'You'll be matured. Like a good cheese. Women are at their best around 30. You'll have men falling at your feet the way you are in bed. You're dynamite.'

Then he rolls on his back and I'm lying on my side with my top leg over his body and my head between his shoulder and chest. He doesn't usually let me do that. Normally he wants to get right up afterwards. This time's different. I can't believe it. He starts stroking my hair! He never does that. Then, when he strokes my face I think I'll die if I don't kiss him. I turn my head and try to, but he puts it back down on his chest. Really softly, though. I know in that minute he's telling me he's sorry he can't kiss me. I don't know why he can't. Only that he's sorry. After that we lay there not moving with his hand still on my hair. I know he's thinking about how much he loves me. Sometimes he can be gentle, but that's the only time he strokes my hair after sex.

We lie there for a long time before he gets up to have a shower to get ready for Lazar's. He tells me to open the front door because he's expecting Belinda. He keeps telling me to go and check because she's supposed to be here and it's almost time to go.

He phones but she isn't home. She still hasn't shown up when he has to call a taxi, so we go to the front gate together. I wait with him. He stands on the footpath. And me, I'm swinging on the inside of the gate.

'Fancy her bloody standing me up,' he laughs at himself. 'A bloody barmaid tart. I'll be the only one bloody there without a date.'

I think he looks pretty nice in his suit. It's black and he's got a white hanky in the pocket and a blue tie. Every time there's a bit of wind, I smell him. He smells like a garden.

'She might still come,' I say.

But really, I'm glad she hasn't come. He's very pissed off. He really doesn't want to go to that posh Lazar's on his own, I can see that. I keep swinging on the gate but it seems obvious to me there's an answer to his problem standing right in front of him. I don't want to be the one to point it out. I can't see why it isn't plain to him.

'Not likely at this hour. Not bloody likely.'

Neither of us says much after that. But if somebody doesn't say it soon, the taxi will come and it'll be too late. He's smoking and walking up and down. I swing backwards and forwards on the gate faster because I have to

do something. I'm shaking a bit because I know I'll have to be the one to say something. I really don't want to but it doesn't look like he's going to.

'I suppose I could be your date.' I say it quiet so he can't hear me if he doesn't want to.

'What?' he says. Like you would've thought I'd said 'let's get married' or something.

'I s'pose I could come.' I say it this time like a kind of whisper. But I say 'I' a bit louder than the other words. Like it can't be such a stupid idea, can it?

But that's where I'm wrong.

'You?' he starts to laugh. 'You!' He laughs until he almost bends over in the street. 'Imagine what the boys would say. Oh, that's too much. Just imagine me sitting there with a fourteen-year-old. Imagine what they'd say. You're too much. You're just too much.'

'I'm fifteen now.' I get that out at least. I can feel myself starting to go like a rock.

'Like that'd make a difference. That'd make a real big difference. I can just imagine how fast that news would travel. Bob Vernon, big criminal barrister. Yeah, his girlfriend's fourteen. Oh no, that's right, it's okay, she just turned fifteen.' He laughs until he has tears in his eyes and is almost choking.

Lucky it's mostly dark because I can feel my ears getting red and my neck too. I don't know when I stop swinging on the gate. I go all still. I think if I move I'm just going to disappear or something. I think if I stay like a rock and relax my face so he doesn't know how I feel I'll be all right. I start praying that the taxi will come fast. He just keeps laughing away to himself every time he thinks of how funny it'd be if he turned up at posh Lazar's with me. Just when I think I can't keep still any more, I see some car headlights come around the corner.

'Now you go in or you'll catch your death,' he says.

'Have a good time,' I say.

The Chief jumps in and slams the door. He waves goodnight to me before the taxi drives away.

I walk up the path. There's a full moon and I stop and look at it. I don't know whether to stand there and try to freeze everything inside me or to say the hate mantra. I can't think, but I know I have to do something. I go inside and throw myself on the couch. The hate mantra just comes out all by itself. It helps if I rock back and forward a bit too. And boy, talk about cry. You've never seen so many tears in one place. I'm not mad or anything. I just know now that there isn't any hope that the Chief and me will be together. There isn't any hope at all. I didn't know that before. I thought it'd happen sooner or later. I mean, if you love someone, eventually they fall in love with you, don't they? I thought he did love me. I know it isn't like we're married or anything. But I thought if we stayed together for a long time we'd just end up being together. Anyway, that's when I know that the sun and moon can fall out of the sky and there's no way we're ever going to be in love like other people.

I still think about suicide sometimes. I'm not that enthusiastic about it, though. It's just a thought that hangs around. Mostly it's because I wonder what I'm here for. I mean, if life's so horrible, what's the point? When I think I'm just hanging around in this torture chamber like an idiot, waiting until I pop off, I wonder why anyone would want to wait. Well, the only real answer there is that it's so bloody hard to knock yourself off. So I try to think of some reason I might be here that I don't know about yet. Maybe religion's the thing. Maybe being a nun or helping people's the go. Could be a clue there, I reckon, and I decide to put it in my next dice decision.

It's some time in fourth term at uni that I hear about Mother Teresa in India. I decide to write and ask her if maybe I could be a volunteer there for a year. Just see what she says. The good part about it is that it would keep me moving. I have to keep moving or my thoughts set like concrete. Suicide thoughts start to drown out everything else. I write Mother Teresa a long letter about how I'd like to work for her. I imagine helping kids who don't have a home or parents and live on the street. I read the letter a lot but never get around to finding out where to send it. That's really very lucky because of what happens just before Christmas.

We have to get presents and Pommy's too tired, so Jacqui and I decide to go to Woden shopping plaza by ourselves. It's Saturday morning. We haven't been shopping for ages, like months, and we need to get, really, all our Christmas presents. We take the car and go to Woden where there's a big Myers store and we shop until the whole back seat and boot is filled up and we're about to leave when Jacqui remembers the Rubik's Cube she'd promised Christian for Christmas.

We go back and just when we're leaving the shop we're nabbed. Thank God we only have one thing in the bag because if they found the car we'd be done for. They take us to the police station in the shopping centre and of course the first thing they do is separate us.

'Say we got a bus and stick to it,' I manage to say to Jacqui before they take her off to another room.

'All right. Now, can you tell us how you came here today?' asks this policeman, who doesn't seem too bad. At least he isn't being a pig. They can sometimes be pigs. I've only been caught once before when I was about fifteen but I was too young to go to court. That policeman was a real pig.

'I got a bus.'

'And what number bus would that be?'

'I don't really know the number. I just catch it across the road from our house. I don't come here much. It just says Woden on the front.'

'So, you came here by bus but you don't know the number of the bus. Well, how are you going to get home if you don't know the number?'

'Well, I guess we'll just go to the same place we got off and the bus will say Yarralumla.'

We go on like that for a while. He keeps asking the same questions over and over and I keep giving him the same answers. I tell him we only stole the toy because Christmas is coming up and we don't have much money. I hope Jacqui's sticking to her story and hasn't spilt the beans. There's nothing for either of us to gain by not sticking to it, so I think she will. Then he gets me with a king hit right between the eyes.

'I put it to you that you come here very often in a yellow Renault and fill that yellow Renault up with shoplifted goods. And I suggest to you that you've come here today in a yellow Renault and it's sitting somewhere in the car park right now, full of stolen goods.'

'I don't really know what you're talking about.' I can't believe it. They must've been watching us all year. They know everything about us. And now they've caught us we've just got one bloody toy. How lucky can you get? But they still don't have the car, so I think we're pretty safe. That is until he says the next thing.

'That's all right. You don't want to tell us the truth. Fine. We'll just sit here and wait. I think we'll wait 'til, oooh, about two o'clock should do it don't you think, Blue? Then we'll go out to the car park and I think the only car sitting there'll be a yellow Renault.'

Blue, the other policeman who'd come in, is the horrible one. They really do have that good-cop, bad-cop routine you hear about on telly. Blue gets this smarmy smile on his face. I'm shitting myself. I figure we're done for now. Still, I don't think there's any point in telling them the truth. I mean, why make it easy?

About three o'clock, they tell me to follow them. Halfway down the corridor Jacqui and her cops join us and Jacqui and me and two of the cops, one is a policewoman, we all get in a police car and start driving away. I think maybe we're driving to the car because it's a huge car park. But, instead, we drive towards home. We get there and pull into the driveway, and you could knock me over with a feather, because the Renault's in the driveway! I think maybe they got all the stuff out of it and they're going to show us what they found when we get inside. But when we go in, Pommy, Betty, Nicole and Christian are all sitting there watching telly. The police start looking all over the house for stolen goods. They tell Jacqui and me to wait in separate bedrooms. Then, after maybe half an hour, the policewoman comes in to me and she's waving a bit of paper.

'Whose is this?' She has my letter to Mother Teresa and she's looking at me with sad and sorry eyes. Straight away I know I'm off the hook.

'It's mine.' And I put a humble look on my face and stare at the floor.

'When did you write it?'

'A couple of days ago.' I know the value of using things to my advantage.

Then she goes out and I hear her say to the other cops 'I think we'd better go', and she whispers something to them and they start to leave.

'Just watch it in future, okay?' she says.

When they leave, Jacqui and I rush out to Pommy to see what had happened.

'When you didn't get home by one o'clock, I thought you might've got caught, then by 1.30 I knew you must've been. Betty had a spare key so we drove in and picked up the car. We knew you'd have it full and you would've lied about coming by car. So anyway, we drove it home, pulled all the tags off everything and put them all away. Then we burned the tags in the backyard. We had to go through the whole house looking for anything incriminating.'

'Fucking amazing.' Jacqui's laughing and shaking her head.

'Well, you are very fortunate girls, aren't you.' Betty's trying not to smile, but even she can't help seeing the funny side. 'And who would have thought Barbara wanting to work with Mother Teresa in India would have come in so handy. You Biggses really have Lady Luck on your side, don't you?'

I never do find out where to send that letter.

It's at the end of the year when we all get a big shock. Our family has never really had a big shock before. I take the phone call. It's the police. I think at first it's Mother who's done something wrong again.

'It's Senior Constable Alex Petersen from Sunbury CIB

here. I'm ringing in relation to Michael John Biggs.' Strange, Mick doesn't even shoplift.

'What's he done?'

'Are you a relative of Mr Biggs?'

'I'm his sister.'

'Is Mr Biggs's mother at home?'

'No, she's working.'

'Well, I'm sorry, but I'm ringing to inform you that your brother's now deceased. We're sorry to have to tell you by phone but with you being in Canberra ...'

I just hang up the phone. I don't even ask how or when or anything.

Betty comes out of the passageway and I look at her.

'Mick's dead.' That's all I say. It doesn't mean anything to me right then. I'm not close to Mick. He's been in boarding school for six years and I've hardly seen him but someone dying isn't something you can believe straight away.

'What are you talking about, dead? What on earth are you talking about?' Betty looks completely horrified. She looks at me as if I've killed him. She shrinks away from me.

'Who was on the phone? Who called? What's happened?' Her face has completely collapsed.

'It was the Sunbury police.'

'What did they say?' By now everyone's here.

'They just said he was dead.'

'But how? There must be some mistake. It must be some other Michael Biggs. What did they say happened?'

'I don't know. They didn't say.'

'Didn't you ask?'

'I didn't think of it.' She looks at me even more like I've killed him myself.

They ring the police back and find out that he used a .22 rifle and shot himself in the mouth. He did it in his room at the hospital and no-one found him for three days. The cleaner opened the door when she noticed a bad smell coming from inside.

I guess Mother got home in the wee hours. Betty was going to tell her in the morning, but she didn't get a chance. Mother answered a call early from the Salesian Brothers and found out. She'd thrown the phone across the room and was screaming when Betty came in from her bedroom. I'm glad I wasn't there.

Afterwards, none of us can believe he's dead. I keep dreaming it's all a dream and that he's still alive. Apart from Gran, who was old, Mick's the first person I've known who's died. I see him in the street and in cars driving past, in shops, on buses. I really believe it's him and there's been a mistake.

Before the funeral, a boy rings us. At first he says he's a friend of Mick's, then he says he and Mick had been lovers. It's the first any of us know about that. He tells us about the weekend they'd spent together in Adelaide the week before. They'd had a good time he says. No, nothing upsetting had happened. He can't answer the only other question we all want to know. Why? He's very upset and Mother invites him to the funeral.

It's at the Salesian College on the day of my 21st birthday. There are the kids who'd known Mick all those years. It's hard to say who takes it the worst. My brother Peter doesn't show much but he'd been closer to Mick than anyone in the family. Betty and Mother cry a lot. So do I, especially when I see him in the coffin and it's the last time I'll ever see his face. When the coffin's lowered into the ground it's like a part of you is being buried, too. That's when you really know you'll never see your brother again.

After the funeral, I ask Mother if she'd invited Arthur Biggs on the grounds that he thought he was Mick's father.

'I rang his new wife. You know he married a Filipino bride? She told me he'd bumped himself off when he'd found out he was going blind.'

'When?'

'A few months ago, I think.'

'How long had they been married?'

'Just a couple of months, I think. She'll survive. She'll get his pension.'

Poor, silly Arthur. Poor Filipino bride. Poor Mick.

At the cemetery, I think Betty's nice to have thought of a pearl necklace for my birthday. It's from the whole family. It means a lot that someone remembered.

I lose it the next week when my bag gets stolen at Bangkok airport. I believe in unconscious acts. I don't need my coming of age present to remind me life can be so unreliable.

MILLST ONE LOVE



I'm due to leave for Japan again two days after the funeral. I'd bought the ticket weeks earlier.

I'm going even though I hate the work. I want to practise my Japanese. I want the money. I want to keep moving. I don't know what I want. I don't know why I'm going. Danger, uncertainty, chaos, anything is better than having too much time on my hands now that uni's finished for four whole months.

A week after I arrive, Mother rings and asks for money because Mick's car's being repossessed unless she pays out the loan. I'm stubborn. I don't want to give my mother money to stop my dead brother's car from getting repossessed. I don't know why I hate the idea but I do. I hate Mother quite a lot in that minute.

'I just got here and haven't made enough money yet. I've got to have enough to get home.'

'You must have some. You're always saying how much money you make over there.'

'Mother, do you remember how I tried to kill myself a year ago because I hate being here so much?'

'But you keep going back.'

'That doesn't mean I like it.'

'Well, why keep doing it then?'

I don't say anything because I don't know the answer myself. Mother can be very pushy sometimes. I don't give her the money and hate her for quite a long time after that.

In Tokyo I meet Annabel. At 38, she tells me she hasn't had sex with a man for free since she'd been 25. She works the swish hotels for clients and has a little black book with names from around the world. She's American and does London, Tokyo and Hong Kong. In winter she goes to her condominium in Guam, which is a tropical island in the pacific run by Americans. After I work with her for a couple of weeks in the Ginza, she invites me there. It's bitterly cold in Japan in February and I can't bring myself to work on the streets. Unlike her, I find hustling for customers humiliating. I've made enough money in the short time I've been here, so, I say Yes.

The next day I'm in Guam.

Guam's part of America and at the airport it doesn't occur to me what an important fact that is until they discover half a joint in my bag that someone had given me months before. I'm a social smoker and hadn't found anyone to share the pleasure. I'd forgotten it was even there.

They go through everything and find my real passport. The photo on the bodgy one looks completely different to my real one. Barbara Biggs has a sweet young face with long, brown hair, acne kindly blotted out by an old photographer. In the other, I look ten years older, with thick glasses and blonde hair pulled into a severe bun at the back. Their first thought is that I've stolen a passport to run drugs. They don't believe that the real picture of me is really me because I still have blonde hair. They take my fingerprints and send them to FBI headquarters 'stateside' and tell me I'm under island arrest until findings of the investigation come back. There's no prison on the island so I'm free to go wherever I want. They keep my passports to make sure I'm not going anywhere.

I phone Annabel who'd quietly gone through customs pretending she didn't know me. She's worried about police attention and tells me not to go near her. Great. There's a front page story in the local newspaper about this suspected drug runner. That's how I find out I'll be going to court for having two passports.

I don't know anyone who knows about being caught with mar ijuana and two passports in an Amer ican protectorate, so I phone the Chief. His work number's listed on international directory assistance. I reverse the charges. I think he owes me a favor.

'You have a reverse charge call from a Miss Barbara Biggs in Guam. Will you accept the call and pay the charges?' I hear him mutter something under his breath.

'From where?'

'Guam, USA.'

'Where's that?'

'It's in Micronesia, sir. Will you accept the call and pay the charges?'

'All right. Put her through.' He's shitty.

'Chief. It's Barbara Biggs. How are you?'

'Fine. Why are you calling me collect from Guam? Are you in trouble?'

'Yes. I've been arrested because they found a joint on me and two passports. I'm going to court in a month and I don't know what to do.'

'Well, you'll have to get yourself a lawyer. What do you expect me to do?'

'I don't know. I thought you could help.'

'I just did. Look, there's nothing I can do from here and this is probably costing a fortune. Just get yourself a lawyer. Okay? Why did you call me anyway.'

'I just thought you could help.'

'I can't. Okay? I have to go. Give me a call when you get back.'

'If I ever get back.'

'I have to go. Bye.'

Thanks for nothing. I thought he owed me one little favor. Okay, even a big one. I thought he'd care just a bit.

Just before I leave the Chief's house for good, I start getting cranky with the girls almost every day. I even do it in front of the Chief. I shout at them in front of him. I feel like doing it more when he's there. He keeps asking me what's wrong. I always say nothing. What am I supposed to say? Part of me wants him to get mad, but he never does.

It gets worse and worse so that hardly a second goes by in the day when I don't want to die. It takes up a lot of time thinking about dying, so you don't have time for other things. Like washing dishes and clothes. Now I know what Gran meant when she said things would 'go to rack and ruin' if you don't clean up.

Then, one Saturday, the Chief sits me down at the dining room table. It's late afternoon and the girls are at their grandma's house.

'I keep asking what's wrong and you won't tell me. I know you're not happy. You're rousing at the girls for no reason. You used to be such a happy little thing. They love you but I can't let this go on. You have to tell me what's the matter.'

Nothing comes out.

'Look, you can tell me anything and I'll help you. Trust me. I can help. Look at me. Are you pregnant?'

I can't look at his eyes. The floor becomes interesting. I

shake my head from side to side.

'Are you in trouble with the police?'

I shake my head again. There's a scab on my knee that I start picking.

'Are you on drugs?'

'Are you sick?'

No. All I can do is move my head. At least he's making that part easy.

'Is there something wrong with your family?' No.

'Are you in love?'

That's when I don't move.

'You're in love.'

Well, he'd guessed. There's no point in not saying now. He isn't going to stop until he gets to the bottom of everything because his questions are like a machine gun that keeps coming. So, I move my head slowly up and down.

'Who with?'

I look up at him for the first time. I don't know if I expect that he'll just know or I'm afraid that he won't. I don't say anything.

'With me?'

I nod just once, up and down.

'Anything else?'

I don't nod.

'What? There's something else.' I'm frozen.

'You want to kill me?' He's so weird. I suppose he spends all day long defending murderers.

I can shake my head to say no to that one.

'You want to kill yourself?'

Well, he's used to doing this in court all day long so I know he's got me. I nod again.

It seems like a long time he sits there not talking. I hang my head and my shoulders slouch over my hands. My right leg's crossed over the left and my foot dangling in the air makes circles. Just like Mum does with her foot. I stop jiggling my foot and click my nails instead.

The Chief puts his hands on the table before pushing himself back in the chair. Then he says this thing I don't think I'll forget if I live to be a hundred.

'I want you out of here by Monday. I never want to see you again.'

I stop clicking my nails, look at him and, I guess maybe that's when my mouth falls open and my eyes fill with tears. I can feel my lips trembling.

'But you said you'd help ...'

'I can't risk the girls finding you on the floor after an overdose. Not for anyone. Be out by Monday.'

I can hardly believe it when he stands up though, because he has tears in his eyes, too. Then he goes up to his bedroom.

I don't know what it means. In one way I'm afraid to go up after him. I think I should. I haven't seen him cry before. I put my head around the door and he's standing there sobbing. When he sees me, he pulls me so close to him and holds me so tight I can hardly breathe. Then he really lets go. He cries and moans so loud he sounds like an animal. I'm crying, too, of course because whenever anyone cries so do I. We stand like that for a long time and cry until neither of us have any tears left.

In the end a lawyer who'd been hanging around the airport when all the kerfuffle happened says he'll represent me. The FBI say they don't have a file on me. The lawyer says I shouldn't say which person I am and he calls me Jane Doe. It's against their legal constitution for someone to incriminate themselves, so I never own up to who I really am. That means they have to give me back both passports because they don't know which is false. The court case is on the front page of the newspaper again for a couple of days.

Punishment is deportation back to Australia.

On the flight home I get quite friendly with this guy and end up telling him what kind of work I'd done in Japan. I also told him I had made lots of money. Very stupid. When we arrive, he and I are talking when I say I want to go and change my money at the airport bank. That's when he says he has to go in a real big hurry. That's when I notice my money missing. I report it to police and give a good description of him. They find him through a taxi driver who'd dropped him off at his house.

'We found him,' one of the detectives says.

'Did you get my money back?' I can't believe my luck. Then the guy looks at the other detective and then back at me.

'And just how did you make this money?'

'What difference does it make?' I ask.

'Well, he said you were working as a prostitute.'

'Isn't the important thing here that he stole my money?' Well, we go on like that for a while until they tell me there's nothing they can do. I already know most guys think prostitutes aren't people. They think sex is something they have a right to get for free. They think any woman who makes a man pay for it is ripping them off. Ripping off the male bloody sex, for Christ's sake. Even if it's legal money, like in Japan. And even if nobody twisted the guy's arm to pay for sex. Bastards.

It makes me feel terrible. For some reason it reminds me of the time with the guys in the red sports car. How they made me feel that last day in Melbourne after I left the Chief's house. I hardly ever think about that day. That's partly because even though I'm pretty up front about most things, it's something I've never told anyone. And if you never tell anyone, you can almost kid yourself that it never happened. Almost.

Uni's already started, so I decide I'll go to Melbourne. Joanne's moved there with Robert and they say I can stay with them. There's also a friend of Steve's, my old boyfriend, whose name is William. He grew up in an Ashram in India from when he was five.

In Guam, when I'd started getting depressed, I'd written to William. I'd told him about my work in Japan, about the grum bling thunder going on inside and what I'd been doing in Guam. I don't know why I wrote to him. I guess he's just one of those lucky guru types who people spill their murky guts to. Thirty years in India was long enough to have become good, I figured. He'd gone with his parents after the Second World War. They lived in Sri Aurobindo's Ashram over there and he left only two years ago.

He seems different to other guys. I trust him. You can really talk to William. He seems to understand me. When he listens you feel he hears you. I think that's really why I'd written to him when I'd felt so terrible.

Joanne had moved from Sydney and bought a house in Elsternwick because Robert's brother was selling his film processing laboratory down here. Robert bought it with the money they made on their Sydney house. I'm staying with them way over the other side of the city, but every night I go to William's house and spend hours talking away into the night. That goes on for at least a couple of weeks. I tell him all about my life.

Then, one night when he walks me down to my car, he kisses me. It's a hard, passionate kiss on the mouth that surprises the hell out of me.

'We both knew it was just a matter of time before that happened, didn't we?'

It hadn't crossed my mind. I'm not the least bit attracted. He isn't very handsome because he has deep acne scars and a lot of wrinkles from working in the sun in India all his life. He's also 38, not that that's so much against him as the other things. But when someone says something like that to you, you can hardly say 'I don't have a clue what you're talking about'. You don't want to hurt a guy's feelings when he's just spent every night talking to you until four in the morning when he has to get up at dawn to work with primates all day long. He works at the zoo.

'Do you want to come back upstairs?' he asks me then. How can I say no?

We make love. It is more like making love than sex. William hasn't had any sex in years and years. He's that kind of

guy. That's why I fall in love with him. After fucking all those guys the year before, I need someone to see me. I think William does. It's like when he's looking at me it feels like he's looking inside me.

It's after the sex that the curse thing starts to happen. It happens with sex and me and men. It reaches deep down into me. I hate it. It opens my heart like a hot oven and fires me into passions that burn.

I start to see his godliness. I'd seen his goodness before, but it's the godliness that bows me down. He's everything I'm not and want to be. He considers things. He asks me questions and listens to the answers. Really listens. He's calm and good and kind and tolerant. He sees me for who I am and doesn't run away. He's so pure. William grows so big he fills me. I mean my heart of course. And I become happier.

The big trouble about William is that he doesn't fall in love with me. It's my intensity. I'm so immediate, it scares people. It scares Joanne and makes her feel I'll swallow her. Now it's William. The essence of me is too much. I'm strange. I know I'm strange. I don't want to be but I don't know how to be any other way.

I try to hide my intensity from William but I don't fool him. He can feel it right through my skin. And I feel him moving away from me as clearly as if he was driving over the horizon. In my mind I wave and call and run after him, in a mock casual kind of way because I'm trying not to scare him, but he drives towards the horizon because he sees the hysteria in my eyes anyway. It's the hysteria of being alone. I've already figured out that if you feel like you're drowning you have to try very hard to hide it. Nobody wants to be a rescuer. The important thing though, and maybe, really, the worst, is that he doesn't go over that line. He doesn't run completely away. He stays just close enough so I can see but not touch. That's metaphorical. In reality I'm in his bed having the depths of my heart plumbed, wrenched and strangled daily. I pine and cry myself to sleep at night.

That hating feeling you get when you love someone and they don't love you is like cement. It seeps into your cracks and weighs you down with a millstone love that makes you so tired you have no will left. It's worse when I have PMT because I get it so badly a week before my period I cry every day until it comes.

It's during one bad PMT time that I make the pact with myself that changes my life forever in a way that I could never have imagined would be so beautiful.

But first he changes my life. Probably more than any other man, except maybe the Chief. William is the first good man I've ever met. It isn't until then I realise I even want to be good.

I'M IN BED and just finished two rosaries, so now I can pray and God or Mary might answer me. Even though it's only afternoon and it's a bright sunny day outside, the light in the dorm's half dark. They always have the curtains closed to keep the heat out like Gran used to do. Usually you're never allowed to be in bed in the afternoon but they've just brought me back from the hospital and I can still hardly stand up but they say None of this nonsense tomorrow my girl. My throat's still rough and sore from where they put the tube down.

I think I want to become a nun but I'm not sure. Margaret, the only girl here who used to be my friend came up to visit and said the girls hate me because they say I just wanted attention. I said is that what you think too and she said Yes. She didn't say so but I know she won't be able to be my friend any more. I know it's probably a venial sin to want attention and a mortal sin to kill yourself. Even if you try it's got to be at least a venial sin too and I'd been trying so hard to be good. I've said two rosaries every night for ages because I want to be a nun like Sister Stanislaw. She's got the kindest eyes and the most peaceful face you've ever seen. She's the one who got me out of the mangle room into the typing class. The two older girls who run the mangle room are best friends and they laugh and make me refold the same sheets even though I can't see why. So I'd much rather type.

Gran would like it if I was a nun but that's not why I want to be one. Lying here I feel more holy than I ever have before which is very strange when I've done such an evil thing. I don't know if the pills did something to my brain or this is how a calling's supposed to feel.

If I become a nun I could live in a convent like this one but on the nun's side. My only job would be to pray all day and be peaceful and holy like Sister Stanislaw. But then I worry I might get bored and not be able to sit still so much after a while because being a nun is for life and Mum's always saying I'm like a bee in a bottle.

That's why I have to pray so hard and even if God doesn't tell me what to do I know Mary will because I've got a secret weapon. Every time I have a Hail Mary on the rosary I say three instead of one. I bet no other kid in the convent says 200 Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers every night.

If that doesn't do the trick I don't know what will.

I find a job working as a tram conductress at the Brunswick depot so William says I can stay with him for a little while until I find my own place on that side of town.

When I move in I fall even more in love with him because he's helping me not go crazy. He seems so wise. Everyone thinks he's some kind of guru. He goes to parties and sits there and watches everyone. He doesn't drink, either. He seems to just know about people. What I love about William most is that he's the only really good person I've ever met. Most people can be good when they know people are looking but I know that for William, being good is part of how he sees himself. It doesn't have anything to do with what other people think. I need that more than anything else.

We talk a lot about my life. I tell him about my family and the Chief and shoplifting. Everything.

'Why do you do these things if you know they're wrong.'

'Well, that's just the thing. They don't feel wrong.'

'They must feel wrong. Everybody knows right from wrong.'

'That's not actually true. When you grow up in a family where everybody's doing the same thing, you don't feel it's wrong. I don't feel anything when I steal. Nothing at all. It's just like shopping.'

William stops and thinks about that for a bit. He smokes away and thinks. He's funny the way he smokes. Like he'd lived in India until he was about 35 and never smoked, then he comes here and takes it up. 'It helps me think,' he says.

Then he looks at me.

'What if you just try not stealing and see how that feels. I mean, if you don't feel it's wrong because you've done it all your life, maybe you should try not doing it. See how that makes you feel.'

It seems like a good idea and I think I'll give it a go. The first time I buy something that I can steal, it's a paint brush. I'd decided to paint William's kitchen chairs. I can so easily steal that brush but I don't. I pay for it. It's \$13 and when I walk out of that shop I feel, well, holy. I walk down the street and feel like a saint. I feel responsible. It feels so great I try again. Same thing. The more I do it, the more normal I feel.

When I'm with William I'm always in awe of him. I spend a lot of time looking in the mirror wondering what I can do to make him like me more. I notice I look better with my lips slightly parted than with them pursed like they often are because I'm so intense. I look more relaxed. So, whenever I'm with William I try to keep my lips a bit floppy and a little bit apart. That's until one day he looks at me with, well, I think contempt might be the word, and asks me why my mouth's hanging open all the time. How mortifying.

I wonder if any good person will ever be able to love me? That's when I start thinking about having a baby. I want to belong. I want someone, not just anyone, but someone pure, who will love me always. I want to love someone good and pure without them turning their back on me. Something inside me, maybe hormones but maybe something else, makes me know a baby will save me. And I will give that baby everything I wish I'd had. I will make that baby's life perfect. I'm lying in bed with William one night after sex when I ask him about it.

'Have you ever got a girl pregnant?'

'Not that I know of. Why?' He looks at me sideways. He's a bit worried, the old William.

'Just wondering. What would you do if you did?'

'Why?' Now he really looks stricken.

'I was just wondering how you felt about babies, that's all.'

'Well, I hardly think I'd be father material. And you wouldn't want some strapping six-foot man coming up to you in twenty years time punching you in the nose, would you?'

I don't say anything, but wonder why if William doesn't want to be a father so much, he's never asked me about contraception. I'm on the Pill but not even asking's presuming a lot. Sounds like you wouldn't see him for dust if anyone around here got pregnant. Or maybe he's just saying that. I can't imagine William abandoning a girl just because she got pregnant. Like, he might not want to get married or anything but he'd have to keep being your friend, wouldn't he?

The reason I move out of William's house is because he asks me to leave. It's after I meet him for lunch at the zoo one day. He doesn't know I'm coming. I want to surprise him with a punnet of freshly shelled peas, his favorite food. I also bring rolls and butter, tomatoes, avocado and lettuce to make salad sandwiches. And a bag of cherries. I wear a strappy dress and summer sandals with heels, not too high, but enough to show off my legs which Mother always says are my best feature. I think William will be proud to have a babe turn up to have lunch with him. Men like that kind of thing. And at 21 I really am a grown-up babe now.

When I arrive, William isn't happy to see me at all. He seems annoyed as he gives me the once over, but I can see he has no choice about taking me to the staff kitchen where a dozen keepers are sitting around a laminex table having lunch. I can smell fresh pooh clinging to the air but don't see the smear of it on the floor until I slip and almost fall.

'That's a bit dangerous,' I say.

'It's not the floor. What's dangerous is those shoes,' says a keeper.

My face prickles with heat and I think of escape. The others talk among themselves and ignore me. So does William. He can't wait for me to go but you can't turn up for lunch and leave five minutes later without the whole world turning to stare at you packing up your untouched bread and butter, tomatoes, avocado and lettuce, your bag of cherries and your punnet of fresh peas. I make us sandwiches and eat mine quickly which isn't a pretty sight because of my small mouth. William's giving me and the peas the silent treatment. He doesn't touch even one. After I finish I tell him he can feed the leftovers to the gorillas and make my getaway. It's the world's longest half-hour.

At home I'm mortified and can't stop thinking about the lunch. It makes me crazy and when I get like that the best thing to do is get away, which I find a very effective alternative to taking buckets of pills. So, I decide to tell the tramways I have a family emergency and hitch to Esperance in Western Australia. Esperance is a place William told me is the most beautiful he's ever seen. It's just as well I decide that too, because if I hadn't, I would have felt worse when he got home that night and reminded me that he'd only said I could stay at his house for a little while.

'Are you doing anything about finding somewhere else to live?' He's sitting with a very straight back in his hard old wooden chair in the kitchen.

'I'm taking a few days off to go to Adelaide to see my sister. I'll start looking when I get back.' I don't want to tell him I'm going to Esperance in case he knows I'm only going because it's his favorite place.

'I think that would be a good idea.' He says it in this nonchalant way like he doesn't really care, but I can see he cares a lot.

On the way over to Adelaide this guy picks me up and we start chatting. He says he's in the Labor Party and then asks what I do. I tell him.

'A conductress, hey? You have to toe the line there. One of the most powerful unions in the country, that one. You've got the big boys running the show there.'

'Tell me about it. There's a guy at work, the union rep, he's a real bastard, he keeps telling me I have to join the union or else.'

'You haven't joined yet?'

'I've got nothing against it, it's just that I hadn't got 'round to it. Then when the guy started heavying me, I decided I didn't want to join a union where people like him go around threatening everybody. He said he'd get me sacked if I didn't pay up by next week. But I'm not going to. Let them sack me for all I care.'

'You don't have to lose your job, you know.'

'That's not what he says.'

'He obviously doesn't know about the new law.'

'And what law might that be?'

'It says if you don't want to join a union for conscientious reasons, you can get an exemption certificate and the union can't strike if you have it. If they do they'll be fined \$10,000 a day for every day they're on strike.'

'Really? And how do you go about getting this certificate?'

'You have to go before a panel and tell them why you don't want to join and they give it to you. I'll write the name of the place down before you go if you like.'

That's on the way to Adelaide, but I never get to Esperance.

I stay with my sister, Bloss, who's taking a break before starting a company with her old boss after half their staff got retrenched. I can see she's turning conservative because of her camel-colored clothes and her red brick town house with framed posters everywhere of painted black horses rearing up and milk maids with Astro Boy eyes dripping tears. But I think however much she tries to fit in she'll always have that giant spider on her leg. It's a tattoo crawling up her calf that she had done when she was going out with a bikie.

I hardly ever see Bloss, so she fills me in on the story of how she ended up living in Adelaide.

Before Mother went up north, before her car accident, she put Bloss in a posh boarding school in country New South Wales. That was funny because Mother thought only boys needed a good education, which is why they were sent to boarding school and we girls weren't. Mother said girls just got married and had babies but boys had to work to feed a family. Why Mother thought that was a big mystery because none of the five guys who fathered her kids stuck around to feed them and she had to work three jobs herself. Deep down she's old fashioned. But with Bloss, I guess she figured the convent hadn't worked out too well for Pommy and me and she should try another tack. The thing about boarding schools is that they cost. Mother could barely pay the boys' fees so there was never much hope for Bloss.

Anyway, Mother got behind on the fees from the very start and the teachers harassed Bloss, so she ran away back to Canberra to stay with Betty. Not long after she got there Mother had her big car accident.

When she came out of hospital, she came back to Canberra, collected Bloss and drove with her to Adelaide and then Whyalla, claiming sickness benefits in a stack of different names along the way. She got caught because she was talking to Betty on the phone about it while the motel operator was listening in. The cops came and arrested Mother. While they were at it, Bloss, aged fourteen, arrived from the shops in the car. She saw the cops and straight away thought about orphanages and reform schools. They saw her pull up, so, quick as a flash, she gave my name and date of birth.

That's how she came to be in Adelaide. She and Mother had stayed there a couple of nights on their way through and Bloss had met a guy. She went and knocked on his door and ended up living with him for more than a year.

The thing with Mother is, that when she got caught the first time she could have just stopped there. But not her. During that next year she'd been bailed and, when she got out, kept going with the scam. The craziest part is, next time she got caught, it was in the exact same way. This time she had collected my brother Peter, twelve, from Melbourne because it was school holidays. She said she was taking him on a trip to Tasmania. Well, it wasn't much of a holiday because the cops turned up at the motel after another phone call to Betty in Canberra. It was the operator. Again. She was carted off to jail and Peter had to phone Betty to get him to Canberra.

The time Mother got caught with Bloss, she did a year in Silverwater Prison in Sydney. That's how Bloss ended up living in Adelaide. Since then, of course, Mother's been out of jail, kept up the old scam, got arrested, bailed, claimed more benefits in more names, got caught again and is now doing another year or so in Cessnock Prison. She's nothing if not dogged. That's how she got to claim benefits in so many different names, not all at once, but they added up. The Sydney papers were beside themselves about how someone could claim in so many names and be caught so many times and still keep doing it. The last time she went to court they called it a GRANNY FRAUD GANG because they couldn't believe one old lady could have been so busy. The Social Security man who'd given evidence against her was 'vicious', according to Mother. He said she'd never get a pension again in her life if she lived to be a 100. That's when Mother had told the court if you make it so easy for people to do, what can you expect? Mother told me this herself on the phone, in a tone that suggested even blind Freddy could see the Government was inviting people to defraud it.

When she was sentenced, the papers lobbied the government to make it harder to get pensions and open bank accounts in false names. Now, thanks to Mother, you need a hundred points of ID before you can sneeze in a public place.

In Adelaide, Bloss asks me to go to Alice Springs and climb Ayers Rock with her instead of heading off to Esperance.

'We can get some wool and knit in the bus on the way up and back. We haven't seen each other for ages and when this company starts I won't have holidays again until it gets off the ground. And God knows when you'll ever come and visit me again.'

This is the first time anyone from the family has visited. Except Mother who came once when she was out of jail. It was

her who rekindled everyone's interest in knitting.

Prison was what started the knitting fever. It's quite a nice jail with a swimming pool and she has her own room and three good meals a day, but Mother's a person who likes to keep busy. She doesn't like thinking time. So she knits like there's no tomorrow, sending half-finished knitwear around the countryside. We get cardigans with no buttons and jumpers with the sleeves not sewn together yet. She says how easy it is to finish them but no one does. I think I'm the only one who wears them. My baby pink cable-knit cardigan without fifteen buttons made me look rakish and wholesomely Country Style. I liked the look so much I took a photo of myself in a mirror wearing it. In the photo you don't notice about the buttons.

Bloss's knitting fever has produced some cableknit numbers for my brother Peter and her new boyfriend, Greg. Bloss finishes hers. She says if I come to Ayers Rock she'll make a jumper for me. I like the idea of my sister knitting for me, just like any old sister who doesn't have a spider crawling up her leg.

We buy some wool on the way up and start knitting like mad women. As the jumpers grow, so do the silences between us in our rush to finish. It's a new game. Knit two purl two on the bus, cast the back stitches over: clickety clack, clickety clack to the campfire crackle, can't stop now the last sleeve's almost done, climbing Ayers rock, cast off.

My jumper's for William and it's finished on the face of the Rock. I sew it up on the bus back to Adelaide and never want to touch another knitting needle in my life.

After I get back to Melbourne I do two things. I find a flat to move into and go to the tribunal place for my certificate so I won't have to join the union.

There are three men on the panel who don't want to give me a certificate because I don't have a good enough reason not to join.

'No one should have to join a club if they don't want to. I don't like the way the union rep talked to me and isn't a club a place you want to join because you like the people? At least?'

'We're not convinced that's a good enough reason, Miss Biggs. We usually find there's a religious reason, something of that nature. In your case it appears to be a certain stubbornness on your part and we're not convinced that's what the law was designed for. However, if you wait outside we'll discuss your application and call you back for our decision.'

I start walking out but stop before I get to the door.

'You should know that whether you give it to me or not I'm not joining. They've already told me I'll lose my job. I'd rather do that than just crack up because they're threatening me. So it's up to you.'

The one in the middle, who said he wasn't convinced, raises his eyebrows and looks at me over his glasses before telling me to wait outside again.

In the end, they give me the certificate.

'I hope you realise the significance of this, Miss Biggs.'

I wonder what he means as I say Yes. I think that's the end of it. But I couldn't be more wrong about that.

I find a flat in Lygon St just around the corner from William's place. It's cheap and just needs a bit of a clean up and some elbow grease. In the end I paint the whole flat in a weekend, staying up until 2am and getting up again at six. I can't wait to see it finished. It's art deco and I buy 1920s and 1930s furniture at an auction room across the road. I find great stuff that just needs the paint stripped off. Joanne tells me how to do it with caustic soda and a wire brush and rinse it off with vinegar to neutralize the caustic. I do it in the gutter outside the flat. She tells me to cover up from head to foot because the caustic soda can burn your skin but when I'm in a hurry to see something happen I can't slow down. When I finish, I look like a napalm victim with red burns on my legs, arms and face.

After I move the furniture in, I buy plants and put lace over the windows so people in the trams that go past my window can't see in.

I keep working on the trams while I'm fixing up my flat. I completely forget about the union.

SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER



One day when I'm going to work on an afternoon shift I see a crowd standing out the front of the depot in Sydney Road. I walk faster to see what all the fuss is about. I can see television cameras and microphones everywhere and wonder what on earth's going on. I start to feel happy because whatever it is, it looks like there isn't much work happening and I can go home. Good. I still have finishing touches to do. I've stripped two of the four blackwood dining chairs I bought at the auction and still have the other two to do.

As I get closer the crowd — all these people I've known and worked with — turn to look at me crossing the road.

'There she is! Scab! Scab! Scumbag scab!'

I turn around to see who they're shouting about but there isn't anybody there except a bunch of cameramen. They rush up behind me. That's when I realise that the crowd is there for me. It's why they're shoving cameras in my face. It takes a few minutes to take in what's going on. I try to walk into the depot to start my shift but the tram workers link arms and block the entrance. I still haven't worked out what I've done wrong. Then I run back across the road to the coffee shop. When you have a mob screaming at you in the street with a bunch of cameras stuck in your face filming how you're taking it all, you want to get away. I sit down in the coffee shop and burst into tears. Then this guy with a Channel 9 microphone asks what my plans are.

'I've got no idea.'

'Well, you're not on strike, are you?'

'I don't really know what's going on.'

'You've got a conscientious objector's certificate, haven't you?'

'Yes, but I got that ages ago. Weeks ago.'

'It means you can work without joining the union and they can't stop you, doesn't it? So you've got the right to go to work. Are you going?'

'I would if they'd let me in.' I'm still crying. He gives me a hanky. The cameraman keeps filming.

'There must be a back entrance. Are you going to try to get in? It's your right to work.'

'I don't know what to do. Maybe I should call head office and ask what I'm s'posed to do.'

'Good. That's a good idea.'

I go back outside. There's a phone box outside the depot in the middle of the mob, so I cross the road again. They scream and boo and push. I feel like I'm in a pantomime. I get inside the phone box and dial the number. Someone leans in and cuts me off. The reporter gives me another coin. People in the crowd push me and won't let me close the door.

'It's Barbara Biggs from the Brunswick Depot here. I've reported to work and there's a bunch of people here who won't let me in. They're pretty pissed off. What should I do?' They don't ask me anything about what's going on, so I guess they must know about it. I wonder why everyone knows except me.

'Just go home.'

What about tomorrow?

'We'll be in touch. We have your contact details here, I

presume. Just go home.'

I leave the phone box and start back towards my flat but the reporters cram around me as well as my colleagues. I can't believe that these people and I have worked in pairs on the trams through a 100 shifts, and they've been perfectly ordinary and nice. Now, here they are, red in the face and they hate me just because I don't want to join their stupid union. Now I'm really glad I haven't joined.

When I get back to the other side of the road, the reporters ask me questions but I ignore them and look back across the road and see my work mates looking so angry. Perfectly ordinary, perfectly nice people turning into a mob right before your eyes. I decide I never want to join a mob or be a sheep, no matter what.

I think everything will be business as usual the next day. That they've made their protest and that's that. I'm wrong again.

I ring Joanne that night and tell her what happened.

'It'll be on the news tonight. Why don't you come over and I'll cook you a lovely dinner. You poor baby, you must be all shaken up.'

Joanne mothers me shamelessly. Her house is cozy. The lounge room has a gas heater, lamps are covered in scarves and one wall features a giant black and white Fellini picture of a rhinoceros at sea in a row boat. She's the best cook, too.

That night we watch all the TV news. It's the first story on all the stations so we flick between them. It's only then I really find out what's going on. I don't know that the law is new and no one else in Victoria has gotten the conscientious certificate before me. Nobody told me the first guy in Sydney who'd tried it had been shot dead.

That's when I realise the situation is blowing up in my face. I find myself in the middle of a political issue. Before now, I wouldn't know a political issue if it bit me on the bum. Having no interest in news or current affairs means you're always a bit behind the eight ball as far as general knowledge and conversation go. Robert says we should watch the ABC current affairs show to find out more. That's how we find out that under the new law unions can be fined for striking against someone who has a conscientious objection exemption certificate.

'Oh, Barb, look what you've gone and done. Can you believe this? She walks into a job as a tram conductress and brings the city to its knees. This is going to be huge.'

'Just a minute, Robert. It's not her fault. She's done all the right things. She's trotted off and got the certificate, and let's face it, that's why they've introduced it. It's not her fault they're all being so silly about it.'

'It could only happen to Barb. I know it's not her fault, but why don't these things happen to other people?'

'Look, stop it, Robert. Can't you see she's terrified?'

'I'm not terrified. I just don't know what to do.'

'You don't have to do anything. They're the ones who have to do something. You just turn up to work. If they don't let you work then you don't work. You keep getting paid. The ball's in their court.'

For all Joanne's little girl voice she's sensible when it counts. I feel better.

That night when I go to bed in their spare room I can't sleep. I lie there thinking that the reason I haven't joined the union is because the union rep was horrible to me. But I know I have to come up with something more sophisticated than that. I don't think anyone should be able to make me join a club if I don't want to. What difference does it make if a few lousy people don't join. If they ignore the whole thing those few people won't make the slightest bit of difference to a strike. And if lots of people don't want to join maybe that means we don't need unions anyway. I know Andrew in Canberra will be so pissed off with me but it isn't as though I'm against unions. I'm not. I'm working overtime thinking it through and still awake when daylight comes through the lace curtains.

Joanne's an artist and they have a special way of understanding things, of getting to the heart of what's really important. I think that's what intuition is. I trust her with most things. Looking around her room, at the water color of the Taj Mahal she painted, the old sewing machine in the corner, a black and white photo of a duck sheltering from morning mist under a small tree, the ironing board piled with freshly-ironed clothes, I can't help noticing that my new flat looks a lot like her house. I even cook like her. Being around her I've learned how to arrange a room and put things together to create balance. She really is more like a mother than a friend. I know what she said about the strike is true and that I don't have to do anything. She's on my side and if I listen to her I'll be all right.

Next day the strike gets worse. Much worse. Every day something new happens that means my little decision to buck against some idiot turns into a political cyclone that tosses around everything around me.

When I get home from Joanne's, the phone doesn't stop ringing. People from radio and TV stations and newspapers want to interview me.

A tramways boss calls and orders me in to meet with him that afternoon.

'Why are you doing this? Can't you see all the trouble you're causing?' There are six of them sitting behind a huge, mahogany table. I'm on my side on my own.

'I'm not doing anything. They've decided to go on strike, not me. Just because there's one of me and lots of them doesn't mean it's my fault.'

They look at each other.

'So, you're not going to back down?'

'I don't think I have to, do I?'

'I can see we're not going to get anywhere here.'

They sigh and tell me I have to meet with the union officials the next day at 10 o'clock to see if we can work out a compromise.

On the way home I buy a newspaper for the first time in my life. In fact, I buy two. *The Age* and *The Herald* both run the story big. They predict all Melbourne's trams and buses will be on strike by tomorrow.

It's so weird seeing yourself on the front page of a newspaper. There's a photo of me being pushed around by my co-workers. And they quote me saying I don't know why they're on strike. Seeing myself in the middle of a public debate makes me see for the first time that politics and current affairs are something of the bigger, more solid world. We moved so often that things like school councils, churches, local councils, laws, elections and governments belonged to outer space. You might as well talk to passing nomads about growing food in the desert. Our family are gypsies, only interested in where the next move will lead and how we'll survive when we get there.

This is a stressful time, but I know by now that the best remedy for stress is more of it. Like if you're stressed about falling sleep at the wheel, drive faster to stay awake. During the strike I go to work on my flat with a vengeance. The whole thing's finished in a few days. The final stripping, oiling the floor, hanging curtains, dusting and polishing furniture. The last touch is yellow roses and irises for the Edwardian table I put in the loungeroom. It's my first home. My very own.

I ask Joanne for dinner. Robert can't come because he's working. But it's Joanne's advice I need, about how to handle what's coming up with the media. All the questions.

I cook a vegetarian lasagna. One of her recipes.

She tells me the flat looks great. That you'd never believe it was the same place because it's so cozy and clean.

Joanne calls me by my initials, BB. I've never liked my name. Barbara sounds so formal and Barb sounds like a cross between a burp and a bah. If anyone calls me Barbie I put my fingers in my mouth and pretend to throw up at their feet.

Joanne says she's never seen so many plants in one room.

'It's like a jungle in here. You don't think you're overdoing it a bit on the plant front do you?'

I go overboard with ideas. If something's good, ten times more has to be better. Joanne's always pulling me back into some kind of balance. I got the basics of my taste from her: antique furniture, stained bare floorboards, white woodwork and clean crisp white walls everywhere except the lounge, which is Tuscan Blue. On the walls I have simple black and white prints and some original canvases I bought for a couple of dollars at a flea market in Guam.

Joanne surveys my handiwork as if it's her own.

'It's like having a surrogate daughter.' She's only about eight years older than me but she's right. She doesn't want to have kids so I guess, like she always says, I'm the daughter she never had.

Over dinner we talk about the strike.

'Do you have any idea what you're getting into here, BB? Those reporters are going to eat you alive.'

'But you said yourself, I'm not doing anything wrong.'

'Don't be so naïve. You've brought Melbourne to its knees. You're going to have to come up with something better than "I'm not doing anything wrong".'

'Isn't that the whole point? I'm not hurting anybody. I'm just exercising my right to decide what I want to do. You said that yourself?'

'I know, but in your own sweet little Pollyanna way, you're attacking a union movement that's so powerful it's destroyed bigger people than you who've got in the way. Look at the dockland murders. These aren't people to be taken lightly. Not to mention the hundreds of families who'll go short this week because their breadwinner's on strike because of you.'

'If they'd just ignored me getting that certificate, no one in Melbourne would've even known that the law had changed and that you could get an exemption. It's only because they've been stupid enough to make such a fuss that the whole thing's come to this.'

'Hmm. You're right about that.' Joanne offers me a cigarette. These days I only smoke when I drink or when I'm with her. She smokes like a chimney. We talk about why I should get pay rises if I'm not a union member and whether or not I am weakening the union movement and whether that should matter. We go on talking until midnight when Robert comes to pick Joanne up.

I kiss her goodnight. I know it's a miracle she made it over at all because with her agoraphobia, sometimes she can't even make it down the street.

I'm getting used to seeing myself in the paper and on telly. I don't just get used to it. I like it. It gives me a taste of what it's like to be part of something bigger than myself. Suddenly I care what people think. Before, other people's opinions were irrelevant. Chances were I'd never see people again who disagreed with me, so what did I care? Apart from my family, there's only a handful of people — Betty, Jacqui and Joanne — I've known for more than a year. Being involved makes me not quite so out there on the fringes of the world where it's so easy to drop off the edge.

More than that, this taste of life the way other people live it makes me want to get away from the fringes. I want to belong. I want to be considered normal — even though I know deep down I never really will be.

As the storm blows around me, I hang onto this thought that I'm going to make this experience count for something. I don't know how or for what, but I know it's the only chance I've ever had or am ever likely to have of meeting people who make society happen. Reporters, politicians, heads of unions. And they're talking to me, so I can't be such an idiot and so totally unimportant, can I? That's when I decide I'm going to get inside that circle somehow, one day.

The next day a few more depots join the Brunswick one and more people want answers. From me.

'Who's put you up to this?'

'Nobody. It was my own idea.'

'Some people are saying you're a stooge for Malcolm Fraser, is that true? You're testing the new law for the Liberal Party?'

'I don't know anything about politics. All I know is that I've got an exemption certificate that says the law's on my side.'

On the third day of the strike a woman from *The Age*

rings me at home and says she'd like to take me to lunch.

'What's your favorite food?'

'Japanese.'

'Will you have lunch tomorrow, say about 12.30? My shout, of course.'

I don't eat Japanese much because it's expensive in Melbourne. And it isn't every day someone invites you to lunch. She tells me she'll pay for a taxi as well. Wow.

At the restaurant I'm intimidated but surprised. She seems like an ordinary person. And she doesn't fire questions at me at all. I order sashimi and she has tempura. She orders sake too. She asks about my life and what I think about things. If I have a boyfriend. I tell her about William and that he works at the zoo. There's a photographer there and he takes lots of pictures. I tell her about how I believed in communism when I was younger but that I'm disillusioned with it now.

'Why?'

'A man I used to work for was a communist and we used to talk about it all the time. I believed in it because people said it was about people being equal. But he was a barrister and he earned a lot of money. I only got paid \$20 a week. He said under a communist system everyone's equal and everyone's paid the same. I thought, if everyone's equal, why didn't he pay me half his salary because wasn't my work just as important as his?'

'And what would your mother think of what you're doing?'

'I think she'd be proud of me because she's always done whatever she's wanted to in her life and never let anyone get in her way.'

I wasn't about to tell her that what I meant was that Mother was right that red hot minute in jail for doing exactly what she wanted to do, which was going around the countryside defrauding the government. Again. Mother wasn't letting anyone tell her what not to do, no Siree.

The next day more tram depots join the strike. The front page stories are about that and how the roads are jammed with cars because no one in Melbourne can get to work on public transport. There are also cartoons showing me with a big chin and acne all over my face. It's very weird seeing yourself in a cartoon. It doesn't make you feel very flattered. But then in *The Age* there is the Japanese lunch interview. She makes me look like a maverick hero. I even sound smart. There's also a photo of me resting my chin on my hand in the restaurant, which makes me look thoughtful and a bit pretty, which is hard because I wouldn't win any prizes in a beauty contest.

I haven't seen William since the strike started. I know he wants to avoid me after that horrible lunch. But when he reads about how he's my boyfriend in the paper, he rings. He's trying to be calm but you can tell he's very shitty.

'I'd prefer it if you didn't bring me into it. I don't really appreciate people at work coming up and asking if that's me being talked about in the newspaper.'

What's happening with William could be making me suicidal, but I have more important things on my mind.

There are more articles in the paper every day. Sometimes three or four on different issues. The worst ones are about me having been a communist because that brings on another whole set of problems. A woman who's a member of the Communist Party comes out supporting me, saying I'm one of them. This woman's even more loony than me. I can see reporters getting excited about trying to tie me and her together but I keep saying I'm not a communist.

'Do you know anyone in the Communist Party?'

'No.'

'Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?'

'No. I don't know anything about politics.'

'You seem to know an awful lot for someone who doesn't know anything about politics.'

The Monday I leave the Chief's house for good, I go back to Gran's flat.

I'm so upset I cry every chance I get. When Gran's not looking. I have to do something or I'll die. I already feel like I'm dying.

I'm desperate.

I decide to go to Owen Dixon chambers where the Chief works. I want to talk to this youngish lawyer guy who's a friend of the Chief's. I've only met him once but Danny is the chief's protégé.

I hitch hike into the city and walk up to Lonsdale Street and look on the board for his name. He's on the sixth floor. I catch the lift and tell his secretary my name and that I want to see him about something private. I think I look sophisticated but the secretary looks at me sideways.

It isn't long before Danny comes to where I'm sitting and asks me into his office.

'Now, to what do I owe the pleasure,' he says, all charm. He's blond, so handsome I bet girls just fall over themselves to even be near him, and he has a grey suit and shiny shoes.

I feel like vomiting I'm that nervous. If the Chief knew I was here he'd be so mad but by now I don't care. Somehow I'm going to end up with the Chief and then my head will stop thinking and thinking once and for all.

'I want to talk to you about Robert.' My voice shakes and I feel my face go red.

'Hmmm. Go on.' I can see he's interested.

I slump in my seat. I don't know what to say.

'I'm in love with him,' I blurt out. That's when I start to cry. He looks a bit kind then. 'Does he know how you feel?'

Have you talked to him about it?' He hands me a hanky.

I nod.

'What does he say?'

'He says not to be silly.'

He looks at me over his glasses for ages.

'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

I knew if he asked any questions about why I loved him, or anything at all, I was going to tell him everything. It's a pretty dangerous thing because the Chief could end up hating me. But then if I don't, I'll keep thinking about dying. I want to tell him no matter how hard it's going to be. But then he changes his questions altogether.

'Have you thought about what you want to do with your life?'

'No. Not really. I don't know.' What's that got to do with anything?

'Have you thought about going back to school?'

'What for?' We have to get back to talking about me and the Chief.

'Well, you seem like an intelligent girl. You could become a lawyer like Robert. You could become anything you want. Women can do anything these days. They don't have to just be secretaries and do housework any more.'

What's he talking about? That's got nothing to do with why I'm here. Doesn't he know anything? Doesn't he know that being a lawyer or doctor or something's only for people like him? How can he be so thick?

'Why don't you think about it?'

'I wouldn't even know where to start.' I'm just being polite. Just the idea of what he's saying makes me mad.

'Think about it.'

I don't say anything else. This isn't helping at all. This fancy talk doesn't have anything to do with me.

Then he says he's got a client in a few minutes and he starts leading me to the door. I haven't even finished what I came to say.

'You will get over it, you know.'

I try to smile and give him back his hanky and he tells me to keep it because it's wringing wet.

Riding down the lift I'm mad all right. How can he even begin to think that I can be like him and the Chief? They have no idea how some people are, what some families are like. Of course it's not that I don't want to be like them. Who wouldn't? Fancy clothes and oysters for dinner and secretaries smiling and whispering around like they're gods or something? But me and them aren't on the same side. They don't even know the other side, that people like me and our family even exist. He hasn't helped me feel better about the Chief at all. Where do people get off telling you things like that?

Now what am I going to do?

I walk on the edge of the footpath close to the traffic. I think about throwing myself under a truck but I just know I'm too much of a coward for that.

I catch a tram to St Kilda Junction. In my bag I have on a long suede coat that's cut into strips up to the vest part, half hippie, half American Indian like the singer Hans Poulsen used to wear on Countdown. I take it out and put it on over my mustard dress. It makes me look more cool. Then I start hitch-hiking down Punt Road to Gran's flat, even though I could easily walk.

I'm looking for something to ease the pain. I don't know what it is.

As soon as I put my thumb out a red sports car stops.

When I lived with the Chief, sometimes after the girls had gone to bed we'd talk in the loungeroom. He'd said he was a communist but didn't belong to the Communist Party. He said he could do more for the cause without so much attention. I was never sure what he did for the cause.

One day on telly we watched President Nixon be the first American President to go to China after the Cold War. The Chief had said how Nixon's guard of honor, when he got off the plane, had been picked because they were all taller than Nixon.

I remember he laughed so hard his belly shook.

'And Nixon's too bloody stupid to realise he's being insulted.'

We never had newspapers in our house when I was growing up. And I can't remember hardly even seeing the news on telly either. No one in our family's interested in that kind of thing.

The little bit of politics I'd ever heard talked about was from the Chief. He also talked about the cases he was working on. He'd defended some women who'd had abortions when they weren't legal. He told me how he'd stood up in court and cross-examined a doctor who'd done abortions in public hospitals on women who'd had them for some health reason.

The fact that women can now have legal abortions was partly because of him.

Every day I'm being interviewed on the radio because they call me at home while they're on air. I agree because I'm not doing anything wrong, so I don't have anything to hide or be ashamed of. Well, at least not about the strike anyway. I don't mind talking to them because by now I'm fired up about how dare they try to make me or anyone else do something they don't want to do. It's amazing how much you can start to care about something when everybody else is caring so much. It forces you to care.

Someone from the ABC calls and asks me to come into the studio to talk on *This Day Tonight*. They ask about all the things Joanne said they would.

'Aren't you weakening the whole union movement by taking this position?'

'I don't see it like that. If 20 per cent of people don't want to join, there should still be enough members to make an impact during a strike while still allowing those people the freedom to choose. If 80 per cent of people don't want to join, then obviously the need for a union isn't there. A natural balance will happen if they let people choose.'

'But how can you take the benefits that union members have fought for if you didn't sacrifice anything for those benefits?'

'I'd be happy not to take them. My pay or conditions are fine. With shiftwork and loading, it's pretty good. If I thought there was a problem maybe I'd feel like I needed to join a union.'

'People have gone on strike for pay rises and better conditions that you're now benefiting from. Is that fair?'

'People have won all kinds of rights for themselves in court cases that end up giving others the same rights. People have paid lawyers to defend their right to have abortions, which ended in abortion law reform that gave all women the right to an abortion. Are those women going to say no, I paid for it, I fought for it, other women shouldn't have the right because they didn't go through the fight with me? Shouldn't people just do what they think is right and let the benefits spill over to everyone else?'

I've never talked like that before. It surprises me how articulate I can sound. Andrew, Mary and Kat had talked to me about politics before but I'd never spouted opinions myself except with Joanne lately. I'm not interested in politics. Mostly what I say is a combination of what Joanne and I talk about and common sense. It gets me out of a few sticky situations with reporters.

When the ABC interview is reported in the papers and on the news. The next day some people love it and others want to strangle me. I walk down the street and people come up and say how fantastic I am and how much they admire me. Then someone calls me a scumbag scab and shakes their fist in my face. People recognise me everywhere. In shops, in the laundromat, walking down the street. That's a weird experience, let me tell you. Especially when most of your life you've walked around practically invisible because you hardly know a soul in any place you've ever lived.

I meet the head of the tramways union, Larry O'Shea. He seems like a pathetic old guy and it's hard to believe he's the head of this powerful union. He tells me about the history of the union movement and about his father and the conditions they worked under way back when.

'I think what your father did was great. Maybe we needed unions then. Maybe things have changed.'

'Changed! Nothing's changed. The bosses are still trying to screw the workers like they've done since time immemorial and it's our job, your job, every worker's job, to stand our ground and fight to the last man. You say why should we worry about you, one person, but let me tell you, you're just the first. You'll open the floodgates, my girl. Mark my words.'

I can see he's an old man who's fought for the cause all his life and he doesn't need this right now. After his tirade he tells me he's about to retire and just now he looks very old and tired. We don't reach any kind of agreement.

'What's going to happen now?' I ask him.

'There's a meeting with the members on Thursday at Collingwood Town Hall. We'll put it to the vote and let them decide.'

'Can I talk to them and put my point of view?'

'They'd tear you apart if you went there, girlie.' He laughs and looks tired at the same time.

'I'll take my chances.'

'If you want to, but I wouldn't if I were you.'

That's a couple of days away. What am I getting myself into? I've never talked to a crowd in my life. He says there'll be a few thousand at the meeting.

It's outside the tramways union office that I meet a researcher for Peter Couchman, who does current affairs on Channel 0. She seems friendly and asks me to her place for a coffee. Because we're sitting in her kitchen, I end up telling her how confused I am about the reporters. The day before there'd been an article in *Truth* newspaper about how I'd been fined for not having a driver's licence. That made page three. Imagine what else they could find out. I'm enjoying being taken seriously for the first time and people are listening to what I'm saying because they think I'm an ordinary person. If they really knew about me I just know everything I say will be dismissed, because how can a prostitute who's been in a nuthouse be taken seriously?

'You seem to be doing a pretty good job of it,' she says.

'I keep thinking they're trying to trap me. I've got a lot of skeletons in my closet you know.'

'Hasn't everyone? Look, from now on, don't talk to anyone without asking me first. Don't ever talk to *Truth* under any circumstances. If they ask questions say you'll only answer if they put them in writing. They're scumbags and you can bet your bottom dollar they'll be digging for dirt on you around the clock.'

Soon Melbourne's whole public transport system is on strike. As the days go on there's more and more in the papers.

There's talk of a national strike. I start getting calls from Sydney and Adelaide radio stations. Someone nominates me for Woman of the Year. Then someone seconds it. What exactly does that mean? Every day in the papers there are cartoons about me or the issue. Most of *The Age's* letters to the editor are for or against my right not to join the union. There are street polls. One day I'm driving over to see Joanne and I see some graffiti on a wall in Carlton saying 'Kill Biggs'. Then one day I get a phone call.

'You're dead.' That's all he says.

That's when I move over to Joanne's place and Robert starts following me around with a camera crew all day long.

'I don't know what I'm going to do with it but this has gotta be worth something one day. This is huge and I've got the opportunity to document it. It'll be a piece of history one day.'

I'm so nervous the night before I don't sleep at all.

In the morning, Robert follows me to the meeting at the Richmond Town Hall and films the whole thing.

It ends up being an anti-climax. I hang around outside most of the time and they won't let me in to talk. Some people come out and ask why I don't want to join the union and I tell them. Some agree with me and some are pissed off. Sometimes I stick my ear to a crack in the door to try to hear what's going on. I wait out there for three hours with Robert and the crew. TV camera crews keep coming out from the meeting to interview me or see if there's anything else going on here. One photographer catches a guy in the act of slapping my face. That's on page one the next day.

Then the meeting's over and I go to the side door to talk to the union guy who promised to let me talk.

'You said you'd let me tell them why I'm not joining. Are you so threatened by a little girlie?'

'They're ready to tear you limb from limb. I don't want that on my conscience.'

Just then, some butch-looking women come screaming abuse at me. There are six of them. They surround me and start pushing me around like I'm a rag doll. Now I really am terrified. Mainly because of the looks on their faces.

'You snotty nosed middle-class bitch. Why don't you go back to your own side of town?'

How bloody funny is that? Me, middle-class.

Something about them being so wrong on that point makes me incredibly calm. I can't believe how calm I am.

Just then, Larry O'Shea pushes through them.

'I told you, girlie. They would've torn you limb from limb.'

'Yeah, bitch. Next time.' And the girls walk off with him. Robert and the guys catch it all on film.

After those butch girls I'm exhausted. I've been holding everything together in case I had to go in there and talk to the angry mob. Now it's all over I go around the corner by myself and cry quite a lot. I want to be taken seriously but I don't know anything about politics. I come from the fringes of the world and end up in the middle of it with people pressing in from every side. The fringes are lonely but the middle is like a pressure cooker. When you live on the edge, no one knows who you are. It's not easy knowing thousands of people hate your guts.

Then I look up and the camera guys are filming. At least Robert puts his arm around me.

'You're incredibly brave you know. I couldn't have done what you did today. I don't think many people could. You're pretty amazing, BB. Even if you are crazy.'

The meeting voted to stay on strike.

That afternoon Anna and I go for a coffee in Lygon Street to talk about me doing an interview with Couchman that night. Four coffee shops in a row won't serve us. Robert and the crew get it on film.

'This is unbelievable stuff,' he says.

Almost two weeks go by like that. The Tramways Board offers me a job in the Ministry of Transport. It's called a secondment. It means the Tramways would be lending me to the Ministry. That way the Tramways Board isn't sacking me but it'll get me off the trams so the union members don't have to work with a scab. I'd be a messenger in the Ministry. Anna tells me it's a way of side-stepping to keep everybody happy. I say no because by then I'm pretty fired up about my rights.

Then *Truth* newspaper starts printing stories about me that make me very nervous. They've gone to ANU and interviewed students there who've said I bought a car while I was there. And took flying lessons.

'How can a 20-year-old student afford a late model car and flying lessons?' the article asks.

It seems to me like it's only a matter of time before everything comes out.

That's when Anna asks me to come over to her place one morning.

'Have you thought about where this is going to end?'

'I haven't thought about anything else.'

'The whole issue's getting a bit stale now. You've made your point. Do you want to know what I think?'

'Yep.'

'I think you should take the job at the Ministry. They're never going to fine the unions, they won't back down and if you don't, either, it could go on for months. For what?'

'To tell the truth, I'm getting a bit worried about what the *Truth* is digging up about me. Remember I told you I had

skeletons? There's a lot more they haven't found out.'

'Exactly. And they will. They're like bloodhounds. I think you should tell them today that you've agreed to accept the secondment and announce it tonight on the Couchman show. What do you say?'

'Can I let you know this afternoon?'

'Sure. Just promise me one thing. We get the exclusive. Don't talk to anyone else. Okay?'

'Sure. Of course.' I'm glad she's been my friend through all this.

'Promise?'

'Promise. Except can we let Helen from *The Age* be there too? She's really nice. She called me yesterday to ask how I was going.'

'Okay, that's no competition for us. That won't come out until the morning. And remember, don't talk to anybody.'

I go over to Joanne's place to ask her what she thinks.

'She's right, it's only a matter of time before they find out everything about you. You've handled the whole thing really well. I'm really proud of you. You've amazed all of us. But just imagine how terrible it'd be and what the papers would do to you if they found out about Japan and everything else. It's just too awful to think about. I agree with Anna. I think you should take the other job.'

I ring Anna and we arrange to meet at her house in Carlton about 8.30. Robert gets his film crew together again and follows us to the studio, which is in the Age building in Spencer Street.

We drive past the front entrance and there are loads of reporters and film crews hanging around. They've been announcing all day over the radio and in the afternoon paper that the strike is about to end and that an announcement will be made on the Couchman show. We go in another entrance where the delivery trucks drive in. Then we go down narrow corridors, past all this machinery, up a lift, then more corridors. It's like a bloody rabbit warren.

Finally we get to the studio and they put some makeup on me.

'They're like a pack of wild dogs down there. They're so shitty we've got her sewn up,' Anna tells Couchman.

'They can bay to the moon for all I care. Now, are you ready? I won't ask you anything hard. I'll save the hardest to last but really, don't worry, it's all straight forward. I'll just ask why you've decided to end the strike and then we'll go into a couple of other details at the end. Are you ready?'

'Mmm hmmm.'

'Are you nervous?'

'A bit.'

'Relax, there's nothing to worry about. You're a natural. Just be yourself.'

The cameraman gives Peter his countdown and then points to him.

'Good evening. We have here in the studio tonight, someone who has dominated the news over the past two weeks. A young woman many of you admire and many of you see as a troublemaker. Barbara Biggs has decided to end the strike which has caused most Melbourne's extreme inconvenience, and, in the case of the union families struggling to survive without an income, some heartache. We'll find out tonight more about this decision that we expect will end the two-week old strike. Stay tuned.'

I'm so nervous my hands are shaking. Anna squeezes my arm and Robert talks me through the ad break.

'Miss Biggs, can you tell us about the decision you made today?'

'I've decided to accept the job offered to me in the Ministry of Transport.'

'That was offered to you a week or so ago, wasn't it? Can you tell us why you didn't accept it then but now you've chosen to take up the offer?'

'I thought there was still a point to be made. I think now it's been made. I don't see this as a backing down from the issue so much as side-stepping it. This way I can stick to my principles and it still leaves the way open for others to apply for the exemption as well.'

He goes on like that for a bit, asking about things I've already talked about before. If I'm a communist, if I'm a Fraser stooge. I've already given the answers before, so I start to relax. I don't see the king hit coming.

'Miss Biggs, is it true that you were a prostitute in Japan?' I don't say anything for a second. I'm stunned. I'm so lucky, because just like I think best in exams, under pressure, I don't completely go to pieces when he asks that. I skip a beat and wait to answer just a little bit too long, but I answer without lying.

'People have said all kinds of things about me in the past two weeks. They've said I'm a witch, I'm a communist, Fraser's stooge. People can think I'm an axe murderer if they like, the point is, it doesn't matter. The issue is whether individuals have the right to choose whether or not they join a union. The issue isn't about me, it's about something much bigger. And that's why it's time for me to step aside and let the issue play itself out without this obsessive focus on one person.'

'Miss Biggs, thank you very much for your time. More, after the break.'

I'm in shock but there's so much going on I can't think.

'That was great. You were great.' It's Anna. She must've known all along he was going to ask me that. How could she

do that without warning me? I thought she was my friend.

'You handled that so well. I was worried for a minute there.' It's Robert. Thank God he's here.

'You handled yourself really well. There was nothing to be nervous about, was there?' Peter Couchman and Anna are both pretending they haven't fucked me over. And the stupid thing is, so am I. I can't bring myself to say anything. When someone hurts my feelings, I never say anything. I don't like being betrayed, but I'm used to it.

After Helen interviews me and they take a photograph for the paper, Anna takes us all back down the way we came. She calls a taxi for me. On the way down I ask her how they knew.

'About what?'

'The prostitute stuff.'

'I don't know. People ring in with all kinds of stuff. He had to ask. It wouldn't have been professional if he'd known and not asked.'

What I don't say is that she could've warned me first. But I don't.

I call Anna the next day to talk but she says she's too busy. I never see her again.

THE STUPID SMILE



The day after the strike ends Sugar Daddy Seb rings from Sydney and asks me to visit. He's read about the commotion in the Sydney papers and knows it's over.

'I've got a boyfriend now,' I tell him.

'That's not important. Come up. You need a rest after all you've been through. Come up and relax and get away for a couple of days. There will be a ticket waiting for you at the airport. Just come.'

I go. I think he realises that me having a boyfriend means we won't sleep together. I want to keep what I have with William pure. It's a silly idea and I don't even know what it means exactly, but I don't want him to be mixed up with Sydney or Seb or anything else in my past. Seb's pretty pissed off when I get there and tell him. He's even booked a swish hotel.

'How could you think that a man would pay for an air ticket for a woman and a hotel and not want to sleep with her. Why? Are you crazy? Why would a man do that?'

Because he's got the money and you're friends, that's why. But I don't say anything and I fly back to Melbourne.

Carol from Sydney rings too. I haven't spoken to her for a couple of years. We lost touch after she moved.

'Good on you. Those bastards shouldn't be allowed to get away with bullying people. I'm really proud of you. Who would've thought you'd give it to them like that?'

Pommy rings, but not about the strike.

'We're moving down from Canberra. I've enrolled in a court reporting course in Melbourne.'

'Did you hear about the strike?'

'Of course I did. I don't know what you were trying to prove. There are people who really care about unions and you don't. You were only doing the job 'til the end of the year, anyway.'

She has me there. She always gets me like that, Pommy. Sometimes it seems to me like she doesn't like anything I do. She doesn't like my friends either.

Mother even rings from jail.

'It's in all the papers up here. Did they pay you for all those interviews you did?'

'No, Mother, they didn't.'

'Well, they should've. They make money out of it you know. Why shouldn't they pay you?'

Will she ever think of anything else? Sigh.

The only person who doesn't ring is my real father. I tried to find him a couple of years ago but the name mother told me, Max Miller from Springvale, hasn't turned up in any telephone books from 1956 or any electoral rolls in the five years after my birth. I've tried to find him, only because I'm a bit curious, but no luck there. He knows he has a daughter he's only seen once and I guess he knows my name. I hoped he might read about me in the papers and get in touch. I don't want him to love me or anything ridiculous like that because we don't know each other from a bar of soap. I guess he is married with a family and that's probably why he doesn't want his wife to know he knocked up a prossie. Still, sometimes I wonder about what he and his three daughters, my half sisters, might look like.

The Monday after the Couchman interview I start work at the Ministry of Transport. There are TV cameras waiting for me even though it's old news by now. I have to share an office with a fat woman who I can tell has decided she doesn't like me even before seeing me. She and the other guy in my office, Bernard, are thick as thieves. He's a good-looking young guy but from the first I can tell they've both decided to make my life miserable.

During the morning break I go into the lunchroom to make a cup of tea. Everybody stops talking for a couple of seconds and starts again but nobody looks at me. Every time I turn this way or that, I can feel eyes burning holes in the back of me. I take the tea to my office. By then I've had so many reactions from people I decide to just put my head down and work. The trouble is, there isn't much to do. I go to Parliament House a couple of times a day to deliver documents and the rest of the time there's nothing. I start bringing a book to read.

'Sorry, you can't read while you're at work.' Smiley Maurie is my boss. He's easy going but also has a family to support and a job to lose.

'What am I supposed to do?'

'Anything but read.'

I go to Maurie's boss, the department head, and ask him what I'm supposed to do. He treats me like I'm a famous movie star. He's the big boss but he's shy with me, which I find very embarrassing. He wants to talk to me about my politics. He babbles on about Idi Amin and Iran and Contra and Afghanistan and I nod. I've heard the names before but don't have a clue what he's talking about. I pretend I do until he goes and asks me a question.

'And what do you think about Qadhafi?'

'Who's that?'

He thinks I'm joking.

'You know, Colonel Qadhafi. Oh, right, you're kidding. That's funny. So what do you think of him?'

'I'm sorry, where's he from?'

'You know, Libya. The dictator. Like Idi Amin.'

'Who's that?' He looks very confused and I begin to feel uncomfortable.

'You must know. He's killed thousands of people. You know. He's been all over the news.'

There's nothing for it but to come clean.

'Actually, I don't know anything about politics.' His face crumples.

He never gets that movie star shine in his eyes again. In fact, he can be a bit mean after that, as though it's all my fault he thought I was some smart person who knew about politics.

Having nothing to do drives me crazy. It's like torture. So I go to the professional people and ask if I can help them.

'I've done maths and statistics at uni but I'll do anything you've got.'

A few people give me work but I'm not much help to any of them until one comes along who's a statistician. Her name is Elizabeth. She's a conservative, single 30-something woman who tries to improve herself with yoga, goes bush walking and camping and befriends me when everyone else keeps their distance. You can recognise Elizabeth anywhere by her long orange hair and the cape she wears (in winter) that goes almost to the floor. When I start doing work for her she begins inviting me for lunch, then to her home and on bush walks.

When the dust settles after the strike I think about William all the time. He and I aren't working. I'm so in love with him it makes me feel sick. The problem is that he doesn't love me and when I visit he's rude but I'm like those round clowns that keep bouncing back up no matter how many times you knock them over. I want to break up with him but I keep thinking if I bounce back up enough times he'll eventually come around.

He doesn't.

One day I make a deal with myself. Something to shift myself from being stuck and depressed and verging on hysteria. I've been on the Pill for years, so I decide I'll go off it. The deal is that I won't go around to William's place or try to have sex if he comes to mine. I'll do it for a month. If I get pregnant it'll be a sign I should stay with him. If I don't it will be a sign to break up with him. I need help because I don't have the courage to do it on my own. He's changed my life and I think that means we're meant to be together. It's my version of the dice game. This way I don't have to make any decisions.

I keep up my end of the deal. I go off the Pill and don't come on to William once. Or go and see him. He comes to my place twice in the month and we have sex because he seduces me, although it's hardly like seducing a virgin. We're right in the middle of it and I think: I could be getting pregnant right now. Straight away I get this holy kind of feeling. Which is just as well because even though I love William big time, sex with him is like making love to an ironing board. William's very English and they don't like to relax too much. Afterwards I think about what it might be like to be pregnant. I think it will be a very solemn thing. I know what a big deal it will be which is a turn up for the books because I usually don't have any idea how things can get out of hand.

Wow. A red sports car. With two gorgeous guys in it. I reckon they're about 25. The driver has jet black hair and a goatee beard.

'Where are you going?' he asks.

'Just down the road. I'm going home.'

'Jump in.'

There're only two seats so I sit on the other guy's knee.

'What's a nice girl like you doing hitching around?' asks the driver. He has quite a nice face. He looks smart.

'Faster than waiting for a bus,' I say.

'She's a bit of a looker,' he says to his friend, nodding in my direction. I don't know why guys say that. I mean, I've got a pretty good body but I also have acne like you can't even imagine. But it does make you feel good.

'You're not wrong,' says his mate. His hand's on my leg and getting higher all the time.

They say their names are Will and Andy. They've just come back from three months driving around China. Wow. I've never met anyone who's been to China before. I haven't met anyone who's been outside Australia. And China's where Mao lives and I'm a communist like the Chief.

'What's it like there?' I ask.

'If you're not doing anything, why don't you come with us? We'll tell you all about it,' says the driver. His name is Will.

I don't really want to go home to Gran's.

'Okay. Why not. I think it's so great you've been there. I've never met anyone who's been. I'd love to go.'

'Why?' asks Andy. He's smaller and skinnier than Will. He wears glasses. Maybe that's why he looks smart.

'I think Mao's great. Where would China be without him?' They look at each other and then at me.

'Have you got rocks in your head?' asks Will. 'Do you know anything about China?'

'I know a lot. I've read the Little Red Book and everything.' They laugh.

'We drove around China for three months and I reckon you'd last about a day there.'

If the Chief thinks China's good then I think it probably is. But how can I argue with people who've been there. I don't know what to say. Anyway, they must know because they let me off the hook and go onto other things.

'You hitch around often?' asks Andy.

'Whenever I want to go somewhere,' I say, like real casual.

'She seems like our kind of chick,' says Will.

They drive me to their flat in South Melbourne. I know why I'm here and they don't waste any time beating around the bush. Will, who I like best, has sex with me first.

'She's not bad for a tart,' he calls out to Andy in the other room. 'She moves and talks and everything.' He laughs.

Why am I feeling so awful when he's paying me a compliment?

Andy has his turn and then the phone rings. He talks just for a minute.

'Ah ha, see you in fifteen.' And he hangs up.

'Quick, Bron's coming 'round,' he says to Will. They both jump up and have showers and dress in casual but smart clothes. No jeans but slacks and leather shoes with little holes in them. They tell me to get dressed.

Bron's about their age. She has long straight blonde hair and looks elegant with a skirt suit, long red fingernails and low high heels. Boy, are they different with her. They offer her a glass of wine and light her cigarette. She owns an art gallery and they have some paintings from China they want her to sell.

When I come into the kitchen they introduce me, but after that it's like I'm not there. I sit, wishing like crazy I was her.

I see the way Will looks at her. He doesn't do that leer thing or say anything crude. He's charming, in fact. All polite and asking her what she thinks about this and that. She sits there with her legs crossed, in a perfect S shape. She's nice. Grown up. So sophisticated.

When she leaves, Will takes her hand and holds it in both of his while he kisses her like really gentle on her cheek that she kind of points at him.

Then Andy leaves with her and I'm alone with Will.

'She was nice,' I say.

'Not as nice as you,' he says. It picks me up a bit but I know he doesn't really think that. Does he? Could he really think I'm nicer than her?

'You know you could earn some good money the way you root.'

'What do you mean?' Maybe I'm nicer only in one kind of way.

'How old are you?'

'Eighteen,' I lie.

'By the time you're 21 you could own a block of flats if you played your cards right.'

'How?'

'Come 'round tomorrow. I'll call a friend. We'll talk about it.'

He drives me home to Gran's street and I get him to let me off at the corner. I don't want him to know she lives in a block of housing commission flats. How uncool.

Next day Will picks me up in Punt Road and drives me back to his place. On the couch there's a man who looks older than Will but not as old as the Chief. Ron has a mean face with big pores on his nose. He explains to me that if he manages me he could make me rich. 'A block of flats in two years.'

'But you've got to have the right kind of body for the job,'

he says. 'Take your clothes off and let's see what you've got.' I'm wearing my mustard dress again. It's my favorite because it makes me look older. It has buttons all the way up the front and I undo them. Hey, I can take my clothes off in front of complete strangers. Will must have told him how talented I am and I don't want to let him down. Ron seems impressed. He looks at Will and raises his eyebrows.

'You're right. Cocky little thing isn't she.' That's even before the dress has come off.

Then when I don't have any clothes on, he takes me into the bedroom. He says he has to try me out. Make sure I'm good for it. But after what seems like a long time of rooting away, he changes positions and puts his dick in my bum.

'Stop. It hurts,' I say and I squeal. But he doesn't stop and I struggle. He holds me down and I cry louder. Then Will comes in.

'Listen mate, you're hurting her? Stop. All right? All right? Cut it out.'

Ron stops then. If Will had given me a bunch of red roses I wouldn't have liked him more in that minute.

The day wears on into the night with both of them 'trying me out'. There's only the street lights and a small lamp lighting the room. I'm sitting on the couch sucking Will's dick while he's standing beside me talking on the telephone. He's telling Andy everything about me and what we've been doing all day.

'She's incredible. She does anything you tell her. I've never seen anything like it,' he says.

He sounds impressed with me and that makes me feel good. It's all been worth it to hear that.

He's soft by then but whenever I stop sucking him he wiggles his bum and waves his dick at my face to let me know to keep going. When I hear how proud he is of me, I think about Bron. He's already said I'm nicer than her, but he doesn't look at me the same. I don't know what it would feel like to be Bron but I want to find out.

Ron's sitting drinking, with no clothes on, with his leg slung over the arm of his chair. None of us has any clothes on. Suddenly, in the middle of the phone call, I feel warm liquid pouring down my face. At first I think it's cum. That's bad enough because usually I'm careful about stopping before that happens. I don't want that in my mouth as well. But it's not. It's wee. He's pissed in my mouth! I can hardly believe it. I gag and spit and run to the bathroom to wash my mouth out.

'I thought you'd swallow it,' he calls out after me.

From the bathroom I can hear Will still talking to Andy.

'You should've seen the look on her face.' He and Ron can't stop laughing. 'It was priceless. Just priceless.'

I don't feel too good. What I can't understand though, is why would he do that? Why would anyone want to do that? Doesn't he like me? He said he did. I come back into the room and look at Will. I try not to think about telling him how I feel because I might cry and that would be very uncool. Well, it isn't simple for a start. But I do give him this look, like I'm confused and disappointed. This, I-thought-you-liked-me kind of look. I feel sick trying to work out why anyone would do that stuff. I feel tears in my eyes but I squeeze them back. Crying's so childish. I want to be sophisticated and I know, at least with sex, that adults do all kinds of things that I don't understand and don't expect I ever will.

When Will hangs up, I'm not sure, but I think he looks guilty.

'Look, I'm sorry,' he's still laughing but trying not to. 'I wanted a piss and you were just there.' He and Ron go into more hysterics.

Can't they see I'm not used to this? That you shouldn't do that to anyone? Then, just when all that's weighing down on me and I get that exploding feeling, something even worse happens.

The phone rings and Will answers. He starts looking from me to Ron and back again.

'Fifteen!' he says. He takes a step away from the phone.

'You're kidding...She said she was eighteen ... Yes ... Hmm...You're sure? ... Okay ... I'll bring her home soon.'

It had to be Gran. She must've found their number among my things. I want to crawl into a hole and die. Now they'll think I'm just a kid.

'That was your grandmother. She says you're only fifteen,'

he accuses me when he's hung up.

'I'm not. I'm eighteen. She tells guys that so they won't want to have sex with me. She's trying to protect me,' I lie.

'Tell the truth. You are bloody fifteen, aren't you?'

'I'm not. I told you. She's Catholic, and look, it's worked hasn't it? She's told you I'm fifteen and you believe her. I'm eighteen.'

He looks at me and tells me to get dressed. On the way home I don't talk much because you don't have much to say to someone who treats you like a toilet.

'Look, I'm sorry for pissing in your mouth. It just happened. I didn't mean it.'

He really does look sorry so I forgive him. He says the block of flats in two years is off.

Now I'm just a kid and he'll never look at me the way he looked at Bron.

Next day Gran books me a train ticket back to Brisbane. I'm going back because I can't stay with her and I have nowhere else to go. I ring Will to tell him I'm going and he says he'll drive me to the station.

He picks me and my two plastic bags of clothes up from the corner near Gran's place. On the way to Spencer Street station, he double-parks on St Kilda Road and stops at a bottle shop to buy some champagne. He opens it right there in the little red sports car and we drink it on the way. Just like people in a Hollywood movie. That has to mean he cares a bit, doesn't it?

'You are fifteen, aren't you?' he asks when he stops to let me out.

'Mmm, hmm,' I say.

He leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

'You take care. And stop telling people you're eighteen. You'll get yourself into trouble.'

Then he speeds off with a wheelie. I can still feel his kiss on my cheek all the way past the houses and traffic lights, right up until I can see cows staring back at me through the window.

I know if I stay living in my flat around the corner from William, there's no way I can stop seeing him. So even though I love my place, there's something more important at stake and I decide to move. If more people knew how great moving was for fixing just about any kind of problem, there'd be less suicide. It's like changing the scenery inside your head.

I find half a house in Charnwood Grove in St Kilda where two students are living. They want to rent the third bedroom. One of the girls, Chris, has a grand piano and is studying music at the conservatorium. The other is Soph, who's studying fine arts at Melbourne Uni. St Kilda's near where Pommy, Jacqui and Christian are living in South Yarra and also near Joanne in Elsternwick. But most of all, it's over the other side of the city from William. Not as good as the moon but a whole lot better than a short walk in the middle of a desperate night.

I pack up my beautiful flat, bring my pot plants and a couple of pieces of furniture, including my bed and the stripped sideboard, and sell the rest through the auction room across the road. I buy a bicycle and start riding to work and back every day.

I love listening to Chris play the piano. She plays records and classical music on the stereo all the time too. There's one piece I hear, called *Für Elise*, that makes my heart want to throw on a pair of wings and fly away with it. I want to learn to play it so badly I'll do anything. I know then and there I'm going to learn it.

I ask Chris if she'll teach me.

'It's a grade five piece. You can't learn that before you've done the other grades.'

'But if I practise a lot I can just learn that one thing, can't I?'

'I don't think so.'

'Couldn't you just give me the music? I learnt piano for a few months when I was a kid. I remember how to read music. Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit for the lines and All Cows Eat Grass for the spaces at the bottom and then on the top you've got FACE for the spaces and Good Boys Deserve Fruit Always for the lines.'

She smiles like you might at a little kid who says they're going to be an astronaut because they know the times tables. Like I'm an idiot.

'Well, you can try if you want. I'll give you some scales but I really think if you want to learn you should start at the beginning.'

I want to play *Für Elise* now, not in five years. I get the feeling Chris is humoring me when she says she'll give me a lesson a week. She says she'll start with simple pieces and scales but that I'll be on my own with *Für Elise* because she can't see any way that I can learn it without doing everything else first.

When you're trying not to think about something that's driving you crazy, the best thing to do is get consumed with something else. Like chess with Keith, the backgammon in Canberra, pool in the psych hospital and knitting that time when William told me he didn't want to live with me any more. And if you want to get obsessed with something you can't get better help than someone saying there's no way they think you'll be able to do it. Then you can say 'fuck you' and become a maniac about it. Not that I think 'fuck you' about Chris because she's an angel. She even looks like an angel, with curly blonde hair and daggy clothes. Angels aren't sexy no matter how nice they are. That's what makes them good.

So I get obsessed about learning *Für Elise*. I start by working out the notes. All Cows Eat Grass, finger on that key, a flat down from there, finger on that key, repeat that four times, back to the first note, Good Boys Deserve Fruit Always, next note, got that, that's two bars done. Phew! Now play them over and over and over until Chris and Soph start groaning out loud or neighbors bang their doors.

After the first few bars the left hand comes in and there are a lot of chords there, so to get a whole bar worked out sometimes takes so long I feel faint, but I push on even when Chris looks at Soph with an if-she-plays-those-bars-one-more-time-I'll-drop-dead kind of look.

Even though Chris grits her teeth through my practice she helps me work out how long the notes have to be held down for. I do the scales as well and she teaches me some easier pieces but I really just want to play *Für Elise*.

I practise for hours and hours a day. Chris tells me Beethoven wrote it for a seventeen-year-old student. I imagine someone writing something so beautiful for me. I imagine how he must have loved her. He probably would have wanted to have sex with her but would never have dreamed of really doing it because she was so pure and beautiful and he was quite old by then.

As soon as my eyes are open I go to the piano, sometimes as early as six in the morning with the soft pedal on. I play for an hour or two before I go to work, then come home and play until eleven at night, just stopping for something to eat. I can't play more because of Chris and Soph, and the neighbors. Lucky that Chris practises at uni and has nearly finished her course. She has a lot of essays to do so she doesn't use the piano much. I'm never sure if she practises outside the house because when she does practise at home, I hang around the lounge room like a bad smell waiting for my turn. After I get about eight bars of *Für Elise* memorised I'm so excited that I can make the music myself. I can't believe it. I feel like a concert pianist sitting there at the grand piano. I keep thinking that if William and Joanne heard me play they'd be so amazed. The piano obsession is great for not thinking about William, but every now and then I can't help imagining how impressed he'd be if he could hear me.

I'm seeing a lot more of Joanne now I'm living on her side of town. I go to her house most weekends and a couple of times during the week. She's as unpredictable as ever and often I have to steel myself to visit. Sometimes I go and she's really happy to see me and other times I rock up and she shouts at me. She's unpredictable with everyone. She

says it's because of her agoraphobia. She's terrified of driving but she really wants to learn so she can take her two dachshunds to the beach. Even though she's already over 30 she doesn't have a licence. Once I go to see her and she isn't very happy with her driving instructor.

'He knew I didn't want to go. He's so pushy.'

'How's he pushy?' We're sitting in her kitchen where we always sit, drinking cups of tea surrounded by her artwork. She's going through a dragon phase. She sells ceramic dragons through a shop. They all have expressions like her dogs, variations of hungry and pleading. For me her kitchen is the messiest, most beautiful, coziest place in the world.

'Well BB, it wasn't my fault. By the time he got here I'd worked myself up into a state and I just couldn't face a lesson. So when I heard the doorbell I thought it best to ignore it, you know how you do. Then I heard him shouting at the front door: "I know you're in there, Joanne. Come out. I know you're there".'

'What did you do?'

'Well, then I hear this kerfuffle down the side of the house and realise he's climbing over the side gate! Which is locked for a reason, I might add. So I hide behind the kitchen door. I hadn't even got dressed and I was in my nightie hiding behind my own kitchen door.'

'So what happened then?' We're both laughing.

'He found me, didn't he?'

'How? And what did you say?'

'He marched right in my kitchen door as though he owned the place, calling out "yoo hoo, Joanne, I know you're in there" until he found me squashed up with the pots and pans and tea towels for heaven's sake. I told him in no uncertain terms that I didn't want a lesson today thank you very much and that he could just go away and come back next week when I might be feeling a tad less fragile. But he wouldn't take no for an answer. I said I'd pay for the lesson and everything but he said he wasn't leaving until I was dressed and in the car. Talk about client commitment, BB. He'll be the death of me, that man.'

Robert processes a lot of ABC film in his lab near their house and Joanne does the book work a couple of days a week. I go and hang out with her there sometimes when I'm on a late shift at work. There's all kinds of people hanging about. One's George Miller and he's doing this incredibly violent film called *Mad Max*. I've only seen bits of it without music or anything but it looks pretty depressing to me. He used to be a doctor but he threw that in to make this film. He's using one of Robert's rooms to edit the movie. I've been thinking about when he was a doctor. We're all sitting around the big lab kitchen table one day and I'm next to George. I ask him this thing I've been wondering but that you could never ask a doctor while he's sitting across his desk in the surgery. I think you could only ask it of someone who used to be a doctor but isn't any more.

'George, when you were a doctor, I guess you had to do pap smears and things like that, didn't you?'

'Yeees.' There's about ten people in the kitchen and they all stop talking.

'When you're doing those kinds of examinations, do you think doctors ever get turned on? I mean, how do you stop yourself getting turned on?'

They're all looking at me and George's mouth is hanging open.

'I'm not even going to honor that question with an answer, BB.'

He keeps staring at me and so does everyone else. I go red. I look at Joanne and she's maybe even more mortified than me. I'm a lot more used to being mortified than she is.

I know there are some questions you're not supposed to ask, but I don't always know what they are. I don't see why it's such a terrible question. I thought maybe we could have an intellectual discussion about it. But then this isn't the first time I've fitted into a place for a while and then said something that makes everyone stop talking.

Every time you go into a new group of people, you have to learn as quick as you can how to fit all the pieces of their particular jigsaw puzzle together so you don't say the wrong thing. I'm pretty fast at it. I have to be because the jigsaws in my life change so fast. Then, just when I'm going like a maniac to work out what's what and where the pieces fit, I'm in another city or house or job and move on to a new puzzle. If I could overlay all my half done puzzles on top of each other I'd probably know more about the world than just about anyone I know. But since you can't do that, I always, eventually, end up looking like a total idiot who's always getting around with her foot in her mouth.

People at the lab avoid me after that day, and I wonder if that has something to do with why Joanne does such a devastating thing a few weeks later.

When I do things that make people think I'm weird, I get obsessed about something or move, so I don't have to think about how there's something wrong with me. I don't want to move *again*. I just got here. So, I play piano like my life depends on it. I go all weekend and play the notes in the air at work. I'm like a maniac.

One day when I'm just not expecting it, I answer the telephone and it's William.

'We're having a kite flying afternoon next Friday after work and I wondered if you'd like to come?'

'Who's we?'

'Oh, just some people at the zoo.'

I'm not completely thrilled about that but if the man you're in love with asks you to watch ants all day long you'd probably say yes.

Seeing William again is like my first date with Fabian. I'm surprised that he seems a bit shy as well, in a stiff English kind of way. Because of that terrible lunch at the zoo, there's no way I'm not going to wear sensible shoes but when I

get there the zoo people are ones I've never seen before. Just to make sure I fit in with all those down to earth types, I've ridden my bicycle.

My heart aches to be with William again but I have to concentrate very hard on the kite flying so I won't say too much in case I'm too annoying, which is very hard because if you knew exactly how to not be annoying you wouldn't be so annoying. Usually it's my mouth, so I try to keep it mostly closed. We have a lovely time and when it's dusk it's time to go and William walks me out of the park to the main road where my bike's locked up against a tree.

'You don't want to ride all that way home in the dark, do you?'

'I do it all the time.'

'But not from way over here, surely.'

'Yeah. I ride everywhere. It's not that far. It only took half an hour, maybe 40 minutes.'

'Why don't you stay at my place and ride home in the morning when it's light?'

'Where would I sleep?'

'I'm sure we can arrange something.'

'I don't think that's a very good idea.' Getting William out of my head is like digging roots out of the ground. I'm not about to let them grow back.

'Oh, come on. It can't hurt.'

He looks right into my eyes and I think to myself how hard can it be to dig just one tiny root out. I think about cups of tea and eggs on toast for breakfast in the morning with him. But he's thinking about other things.

'I suppose I could sleep on the floor,' I say.

'Don't be silly. You can sleep on the bed. It's not like you haven't done it before.'

'I guess I could sleep up the other end.'

'Look, let's just get your bike. I didn't bring mine so we might as well walk.'

I'm pretty happy that he seems to want me to sleep at his house so much but another part of me is very bloody wary too. I'm flying and filled with dread at the same time and wonder why loving is such hard work.

At his place he fries chops and boils some potatoes and carrots and while he cooks we catch up on what each other has been up to. He asks if I've met anyone else and I say no. I don't expect William has because even when we'd met he'd only slept with three women in his whole life and he was 38 then. He'd never even had a relationship. He'd loved a woman in India that he'd gone to school with but when they went to The Mother — she took over the ashram when Sri Aurobindo died — and asked if they could marry she said it wasn't in either of their spiritual interests. That's the way it is in the ashram.

When it comes time to go to bed, I lie down the other end.

'Don't be silly. We're both adults. What can happen?'

So I lay up the same end of the bed as him. He's against the wall. I lie staring at the ceiling hardly breathing.

Not five minutes later he leans over me in quite a provocative way and says he's getting the alarm clock. He sets the clock and when he reaches back over me to put it back on the bedside table he kisses me. Kisses me if you don't mind. He has a very stiff, hard kiss William, not what you'd call sensual. But the fact is, I'm still in love with him, so I don't have a hope.

We make love that night and again the next night but he starts being a bit off hand with me after the second night. I don't ring him again because I think I can't go through the whole job of loving him at close range again. He doesn't ring me either.

When my period's late I feel like I'm hanging in mid-air. This is big. Other things that have happened to me have been big, but this could be monumental.

I tell Joanne.

'But BB, that's awful. I can't imagine you as a mother.'

'Maybe I'd be good at it.'

'But don't you think you're a bit of a busy bee to be tied down with a baby?'

A rush of feelings mush around inside me. It's like I don't belong to a real family. Not really. We're all separate. I want to make a family. To belong. If I had my own baby, it could be like a clean slate and I could write only good things on it. But what if I'm wrong?

'Maybe I might like it.'

'Yes, but will the baby?'

I don't answer because I know she won't believe me. She won't know how strong this feeling is, that I just know I'd be a good mum. Then it occurs to me, maybe this is it. This is what I'm here for.

It's just after, that the devastating thing happens with Joanne.

Her backyard is full of all kinds of pot plants and ceramic statues she's made. She knows everything about plant diseases and how to fix them, how to grow things from cuttings and what to feed them.

She's a person who likes her own space. I can feel Joanne's prickles when she's finding me annoying which is often because I'm so intense. She says I'm needy and insecure.

'What do you mean? Don't you think I've got good self-esteem?'

'Let's put it this way, BB. If you were wearing a price tag, I reckon it'd say about 20 cents.'

I don't really know what she means. I feel fine.

Then one night I find out how much she hates me being needy. I ring to ask about a pot plant of mine that's looking sick. What I'm really ringing her for is to ask if she'll come around to hear me play *Für Elise* because by now I've memorised the first page even though I know she'll find that annoying and needy. This day I catch her in a very bad mood.

'What do you want?' That's the first thing she says.

'Well, one of my plants has these lumps all over the back of the leaves.'

'Well?'

'I think it's some kind of disease.'

Then she starts shouting in a way that makes me hold the phone away from my ear. She can turn very suddenly, Joanne.

'Just go away, okay? Leave me alone! piss off! Get it? Don't call me, don't come around, don't leave notes under my door. Just leave me alone. You drive me crazy!'

Then she hangs up. Even though part of me knows she finds me so intense, part of me doesn't want to know. I'm crushed because she's my best friend. And why did she have to do this now — before she's heard me play *Für Elise*?

What happens next day makes it worse.

But even Joanne can't wipe out the big thing.

I ride my bike to a family planning clinic in Church Street, Richmond. It's up a very steep, steep hill. Even though I'm pretty fit, I can see the top of the hill but I don't think I'll make it without getting off and walking. I struggle and puff and stand up to push the pedals and make it in the end but I'm exhausted when I get there.

I wee into a jar and they do the test. Then the doctor calls me back into the room.

'You're not married, are you?'

'No.'

'And do you have a boyfriend?'

'Not really. No.'

'Well, you are pregnant. There are options if you don't want to keep the child. We can arrange for you to see a counselor to discuss them if you'd like.'

'Thanks. I'll think about it.'

But I know I'm not going to think about it even for a second. I feel like God. If you imagine being told you're going to give birth to the world's first baby, that's how I feel. I also know this is going to change my life. Maybe forever. Maybe completely. I wonder how pregnant women survive feeling so important? How do they just not explode with importance?

I get on my bike and fly down that Church Street hill at a million miles an hour with no hands. I have my arms spread out wide and the wind rushing through my hair and blowing it right back off my face. I'm so bloody happy I feel like the bike can take off and fly. Then I'm stricken. I think, what if I

have an accident! What about my baby?

I put the brake on, slow and careful, and ride the rest of the way home with this stupid smile on my face.

To be continued...

EPILOGUE

Robert Vernon died in March, 1997. On New Year's Eve, 2002, I met two senior legal identities who had known Vernon well. One said the National Crime Authority had investigated Vernon for three years for suspected organised crime connections and money laundering. The other, a well-known barrister, said Vernon was 'black to the core — the most corrupt barrister I have ever known'.

B. B.

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